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"Note"

"I have no words
to express my thanks"

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very bad habit to write on
books like you. I also beca
a fool.

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BEST MURDER STORIES



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"No one should read it."
The book is about tests."

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Very Bad Book

very interesting

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

The publishers wish to thank the authors who have kindly permitted their stories to be reprinted in this book. Acknowledgments are also due to the editors of the following periodicals in which the stories originally appeared: *Britannia and Eve* (for the story by William J. Makin); the *Grand Magazine* (for the stories by W. Cooper-Willson, Brandon Fleming and Dorothy L. Sayers); *Nash's Magazine*, the *Novel Magazine*, *Pan* and *Pearson's Magazine* for the stories by Arthur Tuckerman, Stacy Aumonier, Will Scott and Roy Vickers, respectively; the *Strand Magazine* (for the stories by Hylton Cleaver and G. H. Malloch); the *Twenty Story Magazine* (for the stories by Elliot Bailey, W. English, Valentine Gregory and Van Harrison).

Readers of This book must
me on Range ~~in~~

*Have you read this
my little sweet girl. May?*

BY
STACY AUMONIER

★

THE ACCIDENT OF CRIME

Every seaman who makes the City of Bordeaux a port of call, knows the Rue Lucien Fauré. It is one of those irregular streets which one finds in the neighbourhood of docks in every city in the world. At the further end of the Rue Lucien Fauré is a little cul-de-sac known as Place Duquesne, an obscure honeycomb of high, dingy houses. It had often been pointed out to the authorities that the Place Duquesne was a scandal to the neighbourhood; not that the houses themselves were either better or worse than those of adjoining streets, but that the inhabitants belonged almost entirely to the criminal classes.

A murderer, an apache, a blackmailer, a coiner, hardly ever appeared in the Court of Justice without his habitation being traced to this unsavoury retreat, yet the authorities did nothing. Indeed, Chief Inspector Tolozan, who had that neighbourhood under his own special supervision, said that he preferred it as it was. He affirmed—not unreasonably—that it was better to have all one's birds in one nest rather than have them scattered all over the wood.

His colleagues were inclined to laugh at "Papa Tolozan", as they called him, for his extravagant moral theories.

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Crime, he always contended, was an accident. Somewhere, at some time in everyone's life, it was just touch and go.

The answer would be: "Well, what about old Laissac?"

Laissac was at that time fifty-seven years of age. Twenty-one years and ten months of that period had been passed in penitentiaries, prisons and convict establishments. He was already an old man, but a wiry, energetic old man, with a battered face, scarred by years of vicious dissipations and passions. At the age of seventeen he had killed a Chinaman. The affair was the outcome of a dockside mêlée, and many contended that Laissac was not altogether responsible.

However that may be, the examining magistrate at that time was of opinion that there had been rather too much of that kind of thing of late, and that an example must be made of someone. Even the Chink must be allowed some show of protection. Laissac was sent to a penitentiary for two years. He returned an avowed enemy of society. Since that day he had been convicted of burglary, larceny, passing of counterfeit coins, assault and drunkenness.

These were the crimes of which he had been actually convicted, but everyone knew that they were only an infinitesimal fraction of the crimes of which he was guilty. He was a cunning old man. He had bashed one of his pals and maimed him for life, and the man was afraid to give evidence against him. He had treated two women at least with almost unspeakable cruelty. There was no record of his ever having done a single action of kindness or unselfishness. He had, moreover, been a perverter and betrayer of others. He bred crime with malicious enjoyment. He trained young men in the tricks of the trade. He dealt in stolen property. He was a centre, a focus of criminal activity.

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It is certainly true that Inspector Tolozan had a poor case in old Laissac to confute his friends' theories. Where was "the accident of crime" in such a criminal?

One day old Laissac was playing with his dog, his beloved Sancho, and saying:

"Up, soldier! Courage, my old warrior.", . . .

Sancho was a strange, forlorn-looking beast, not entirely retriever, not wholly poodle; indeed, not necessarily dog at all. He had large sentimental eyes, and he worshipped his master with unquestioning adoration. When his master was out, as he frequently was, on strange nocturnal adventures, he would lie on the mat by the door, his nostrils snuggled between his paws, and watch the door. Directly his master entered the house, Sancho would be aware of it. He would utter one long whine of pleasure, and his skin would shake and tremble with excitement. The reason of his perturbation this morning was that part of the chimney had fallen down with a crash. The brickwork had given way, and a little way up old Laissac could see a narrow opening, revealing the leads on to the adjoining roof. It was late summer, and such a disaster did not appal him unduly.

"Courage," he said. "To-morrow that shall be set right. To-day and to-night we have another omelette in the pan, old comrade. To-morrow there will be ham-bones for Sancho and a nice bottle of *fine champagne* for the breadwinner, eh? Lie down, boy, that's only old Grogard!"

The dog went into his corner, and a most forlorn-looking old man entered the room. He had thin, white hair, a narrow, horselike face with prominent eyes. His face appeared much too thin and small for his body, which had unexpected projections and convolutions. From his movements it was immediately apparent that his left side was

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paralysed. On the left breast of his shabby green coat was a medal for saving lives. The medal recorded that at the age of twenty-six he had plunged into the Garonne and saved the lives of two boys. He sat down and produced a sheet of dirty paper.

"Everything is in order," he said dolefully.

"Good," said Laissac. "Show us the plan."

"This is the garage and the room above where you enter. The chauffeur left with Madame Delanelle and her maid for Pau this morning. They will be away for three weeks or more. Monsieur Delanelle sleeps in this room on the first floor; but, as you know, he is a drug fiend. From eleven o'clock till four in the morning he is in a coma. Lisette and the other maid sleep on the top floor. Lisette will see that this other woman gets a little of the white powder in her cider before she retires. There is no one else in the house. There is no dog."

"It appears a modest enterprise."

"It is as easy as opening a bottle of white oil. The door of the room above the garage, connecting with the first landing in the house, is locked, and the key taken away, but it is a very old-fashioned lock. You could open it with a bone toothpick, master."

"H'm. I suppose Lisette expects something out of this?"

The old man sniggered, and blew his nose on a red handkerchief.

"She's doing it for love."

"You mean—young Leon Briteuil?"

"Yes. Now this is the point, master. Are you going to crack this crib yourself, or would you like young Briteuil to go along? He's a promising lad, and he would be proud to be in a job with you."

"What stuff is there?"

"In the second drawer on the left-hand side in a bureau in the salon is a cash-box, where Monsieur keeps the money from his rents. He owns a lot of small property. There ought to be about ten thousand francs. Madame has taken most of her jewels, but there are a few trinkets in a jewel case in the bedroom. For the rest there is a collection of old coins in a cabinet, some of them gold. That is in the library, here, see? And the usual silver plate and trinkets scattered about the house. Altogether a useful haul; too much for one man to carry."

"Very well. I'll take the young man—tell him to be at the Place du Pont the other side of the river at twelve-thirty. If he fails or makes the slightest slip, I'll break his face. Tell him that. That's all."

"Right you are, master."

Young Briteuil was not quite the lion-hearted person he liked to appear, and this message frightened him. Long before the fateful hour of the appointment, he was dreading his association with the infamous Laissac more than the hazardous adventure upon which he was committed. He would rather have made the attempt himself. He was neat with his fingers, and had been quite successful in pilfering little articles from the big stores, but he had never yet experienced the thrill of housebreaking.

Moreover, he felt bitterly that the arrangement was unjust. It was he who had manœuvred the whole field of operation; he, with his spurious lovemaking to the middle-aged, coquettish Lisette. There was a small fortune to be picked up, but because he was pledged to the gang, of which Laissac was the chief, his award would probably amount to a capful of sous. Laissac had the handling of the loot, and he would say that it realized anything he fancied. Grogard had to have his commission also. The whole

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thing was grossly unfair. He deeply regretted that he had not kept the courting of Lisette a secret. Visions of unholy orgies danced before his eyes.

However, there it was, and he had to make the best of it. He was politeness and humility itself when he met old Laissac at the corner of the Place du Pont punctually at the hour appointed. Laissac was in one of his sullen moods, and they trudged in silence out to the northern suburb where the villa of Monsieur Delanelle was situated. The night was reasonably dark and fine. As they got nearer and nearer to their destination, and Laissac became more and more unresponsive, the younger man's nerves began to get on edge. He was becoming distinctly jumpy, and, as people will in such a condition, he carried things to the opposite extreme. He pretended to be extremely light-hearted, and to treat the affair as a most trivial exploit. He even assumed an air of flippancy; but in this attitude he was not encouraged by his companion, who on more than one occasion told him to keep his ugly mouth shut.

"You won't be so merry when you get inside," he said.

"But there is no danger, no danger at all," laughed the young man unconvincingly.

"There's always danger in our job," growled Laissac. "It's the things you don't expect that you've got to look out for. You can make every preparation, think of every eventuality, and then suddenly, presto! a bullet from some unknown quarter. The gendarmes may have had wind of it all the time. Monsieur Delanelle may not have indulged in his dope for once. He may be sitting up with a loaded gun. The girl Lisette may be an informer. The other girl may have heard and given the game away. Madame and the chauffeur may return at any moment. People have punctures sometimes. You can even get through the job,

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and then be nabbed at the corner of the street, or the next morning, or the following week. There's a hundred things likely to give you away. Inspector Tolozan himself may be hiding in the garden with a half-dozen of his thick-necks. Don't you persuade yourself it's a soft thing, my white-livered cockerel."

This speech did not raise Leon's spirits. When they reached the wall adjoining the garage he was trembling like a leaf, and his teeth began to chatter.

"I could do with a nip of brandy," he said suddenly, in a changed voice.

The old criminal looked at him contemptuously, and produced a flask from some mysterious pocket. He took a swig, and then handed it to his companion. He allowed him a little gulp, and then snatched the flask away.

"Now, up you go," he said.

Leon knew then that escape was impossible. Old Laissac held out his hands for him to rest his heel upon. He did so, and found himself jerked to the top of the wall. The old man scrambled up after him, somehow. They then dropped down quietly on to some sacking in the corner of the yard. The garage and the house were in complete darkness. The night was unnaturally still, the kind of night when every little sound becomes unduly magnified.

Laissac regarded the dim structure of the garage with a professional eye. Leon was listening for sounds, and imagining eyes peering at them through the shutters—perhaps a pistol or two already covering them. His heart was beating rapidly. He had never imagined it was going to be such a nerve-racking business. Curse the old man! Why didn't he let him have his full whack at the brandy? A sudden temptation crept over him. The old man was peering forward. He would hit him suddenly over the back of the

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head, and then bolt. Yes, he would. He knew he would never have the courage to force his way into that sinister place of unknown terrors. He would rather die out here in the yard.

"Come on," said Laissac, advancing cautiously towards the door of the garage.

Leon slunk behind him, watching for his opportunity. He had no weapon, nothing but his hands, and he knew that in a struggle with Laissac he would probably be worsted. The tidy concrete floor of the yard held out no hope of promiscuous weapons. Once he thought:

"I will strike him suddenly on the back of the head with all my might. As he falls, I'll strike him again. When he's on the ground I'll kick his brains out."

Laissac stood by the wood frame of the garage door looking up and judging the best way to make an entrance of the window above. While he was doing so, Leon stared round, and his eye alighted on a short, dark object near the wall. It was a piece of iron piping. He sidled towards it and surreptitiously picked it up. At that exact instant Laissac glanced round at him abruptly and whispered:

"What are you doing?"

Now must this desperate venture be brought to a head. He stumbled towards Laissac, mumbling vaguely:

"I thought this might be useful!"

Leon was left-handed, and he gripped the iron piping in that hand. Laissac was facing him, and he must be put off his guard. The young man mumbled:

"What's the orders, master?"

He doubtless hoped from this that Laissac would turn round and look up again. He made no allowance for that animal instinct of self-preservation which is most strongly marked in men of low mentality. Without a word Laissac

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sprang at him. He wanted to scream with fear, but instead he struck wildly with the iron. He felt it hit something ineffectually. A blow on the face staggered him. In the agony of recovery he realized that his weapon had been wrenched from his hands! Now, indeed, he would scream and rouse the neighbourhood, to save him from this monster. If he could only get his voice! Curse this old devil! Where is he? Spare me! Oh, no, no!

Old Laissac stuffed the body behind a bin where rubbish was put in the corner of the yard. The struggle had been curiously silent and quick. The only sound had been the thud of the iron on his treacherous assistant's skull, a few low growls and blows. Fortunately, the young man had been too paralysed with fear to call out. Laissac stood in the shadow of the wall and waited. Had the struggle attracted any attention? Would it be as well to abandon the enterprise? He thought it all out dispassionately. An owl, with a deep mellow note, sailed majestically away towards a neighbouring church. Perhaps it was rather foolish. If he were caught, and the body discovered, that would be the end of the master! That would be a great misfortune. Everyone would miss him so, and he still had life and fun in him. He laughed bitterly. Yes, perhaps he had better steal quietly away. He moved over to the outer wall.

Then a strange revulsion came over him, perhaps a deep bitterness with life, or a gambler's lure. Perhaps it was only professional vanity. He had come here to burgle this villa, and he disliked being thwarted. Besides, it was such a soft thing—all the dispositions so carefully laid. He had already thought out the way to mount to the bedroom above the door. In half an hour he might be richer by many thousand francs, and he had been getting rather hard up of late. That young fool would be one less to pay. He

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shrugged his broad shoulders and crept back to the garage door.

In ten minutes' time he had not only entered the room above the garage, but had forced the old-fashioned lock and entered the passage connecting with the house. He was perfectly cool now, his senses keenly alert. He went down on his hands and knees and listened. He waited some time, focusing in his mind the exact position of the rooms as shown in the plan old Grogard had given him. He crawled along the corridor like a large gorilla. At the second door on the left he heard the heavy, stentorian breathing of a man inside the room. Monsieur Delanelle—good! It sounded like the breathing of a man under the influence of drugs or drink.

After that, with greater confidence, he made his way downstairs to the salon. With unerring precision he located the drawer in the bureau where the cash-box was kept. The box was smaller than he expected, and he decided to take it away rather than to indulge in the rather noisy business of forcing the lock. He slipped it into a sack. Guided by his electric torch, he made a rapid round of the reception rooms. He took most of the collection of old coins from the cabinet in the library and a few more silver trinkets. Young Briteuil would certainly have been useful, carrying all this bulkier stuff. Rather unfortunate, but still it served the young fool right. He, Laissac, was not going to encumber himself with plate. A few small and easily negotiable pieces were all he desired, sufficient to keep him in old brandy and Sancho in succulent ham-bones for a few months to come. A modest and simple fellow, old Laissac.

The sack was soon sufficiently full. He paused by the table in the dining-room and helped himself to another

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swig of brandy. Then he blinked his eyes. What else was there? Oh, yes. Grognard had said that there were a few of Madame's jewels in the jewel case. But that was in the bedroom where Monsieur Delanelle was sleeping. That was a different matter, and yet, perhaps after all, perhaps a pity not to have the jewels.

H'm, Monsieur Delanelle was in one of his drug stupors. It must be about two o'clock. They said he never woke till five or six. Why not? Besides, what was a drugged man? He couldn't give any trouble. If he tried to, Laissac could easily knock him over the head, as he had young Briteuil—might just as well have those few extra jewels. His senses tingled rather more acutely as he once more crept upstairs. He pressed his ear to the keyhole of Monsieur Delanelle's bedroom. The master of the house was still sleeping. He turned the handle quietly, listened, then stole into the room, closing the door after him.

Now for it! He kept the play of his electric torch turned from the bed. The sleeper was breathing in an ugly, irregular way. He swept the light along the wall and located the dressing-table—satinwood and silver fittings. A new piece of furniture—curse it! The top right-hand drawer was locked. And that was the drawer which the woman said contained the jewel case. Dare he force the lock? Was it worth it? He had done very well. Why not clear off now? Madame had probably taken everything of worth.

He hesitated and looked in the direction of the bed. Rich, guzzling old pig!

Why should he have all the comforts and luxuries whilst Laissac had to work hard, and at such risk, for his living? Be damned to him! He put down his sack and took a small tool out of his breast pocket. It was necessary to make a certain amount of noise, but after all the man in the bed

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wasn't much better than a corpse. Laissac went down on his knees and applied himself to his task. The minutes passed. Confound it! It was a very obstinate lock. He was becoming quite immersed in its intricacy when something abruptly jarred his sensibilities. It was a question of silence. The sleeper was no longer snoring or breathing violently. In fact, he was making no noise at all.

Laissac was aware of a queer tremor creeping down his spine for the first time that evening. He was a fool not to have cleared out after taking the cash-box. He had overdone it. The man in bed was awake and watching him! What was the best thing to do? Perhaps the fool had a revolver? If there was any trouble he must fight. He couldn't allow himself to be taken, with that body down below stuffed behind the dustbin. Why didn't the tormentor call out or challenge him? Laissac crept lower and twisted his body into a crouching position.

By this action he saved his life, for there was a sudden blinding flash, and a bullet struck the dressing-table just at the place where his head had been. This snapping of the tension was almost a relief. It was a joy to révert to the primitive instincts of self-preservation. At the foot of the bed an eiderdown had fallen. Instinct drove him to snatch this up. He crumpled it up into the rough form of a body and thrust it with his right hand over the end of the bed. Another bullet went through it and struck the dressing-table again. But as this happened, Laissac swung to the left side of the bed, sprang across it, and gripped the occupant's throat.

The struggle was of momentary duration. The revolver dropped to the floor. The man, addicted to drugs, gasped, spluttered, then his frame shook violently and he crumbled into an inert mass upon the bed. A blind fury was upon

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Laissac. He struck the still form again and again. Then a revulsion of terror came over him. He crouched in the darkness, sweating with fear.

"They'll get me this time," he thought. "Those shots must have been heard." Lisette, the other maid, the neighbours, the gendarmes—two of these disgusting bodies to account for. "I'd better leave the swag and clear." He drained the rest of the brandy and staggered uncertainly towards the door. The house was very still. He turned the handle and went into the passage. Then one of those voices which were always directing his life said:

"Courage, old man; why leave the sack behind? You've worked for it. Besides, one might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!" He went quietly back and picked up the sack. But his hands were shaking violently. As he was returning, the sack with its metallic contents struck the end of the brass bed. This little accident affected him fantastically. He was all fingers and thumbs to-night. What was the matter? Was he losing his nerve? Getting old? Of course, the time must come when——

God! What was that? He stood dead still by the jamb of the door. There was the sound of stealthy tread on the stairs, the distant creak of a board. How often in his life had he not imagined that! But there was no question about it to-night. He was completely unstrung. "If there's another fight I won't be able to face it. I'm done."

An interminable interval of time passed, and then that quiet creaking of another board. The person, whoever it was, was getting nearer. He struggled desperately to hold himself together—to be prepared for one more struggle, even if it should be his last. Suddenly a whisper came down the stairs:

"Leon!"

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Leon! What did they mean? Eh? Oh, yes—Leon Briteuil!

Of course, that fool of a woman, the informer—Lisette. She thought it was Leon. Leon, her lover. He breathed more easily. Women have their uses and purposes, after all. But he must be very circumspect. There must be no screaming. She repeated:

“Leon? Is that you?”

With a great effort he controlled his voice.

“It’s all right. I’m Leon’s friend. He’s outside.”

The woman gave a little gasp of astonishment.

“Oh! I did not know——”

“Very quietly, mademoiselle. Compose yourself. I must now rejoin him. Everything is going well.”

“But I would see him. I wish to see him to-night. He promised——”

Laissac hurried noiselessly down the stairs, thankful for the darkness. He waited till he had reached the landing below, then he called up in a husky voice:

“Wait till ten minutes after I have left the house, mademoiselle, then come down. You will find your Leon waiting for you behind the dustbin in the yard.” And, fortunately for Lisette’s momentary peace of mind, she could not see the almost inhuman grin which accompanied this remark.

From the moment of his uttering this speech till four hours later, when his mangled body was discovered by a gendarme on the pavement just below the window of the house in which he lived in the Place Duquesne, there is no definite record of old Laissac’s movements or whereabouts. They exist only in those realms of conjecture in which Monsieur Tolozan is so noted an explorer. Old Laissac had a genius for passing unnoticed. He could walk through the streets of Bordeaux in broad daylight with stolen clocks

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under each arm, and it never occurred to anyone to suspect him, but when it came to travelling in the dark he was unique. At the inquest which was held five days later, not a single witness could come forward and say that they had seen anything of him, either that evening or night.

That highly eminent advocate, Maxim Colbert, President of the Court, passed from the cool mortuary into the stuffy court-house with a bored, preoccupied air. Dead bodies did not greatly interest him, and he had had too much experience of them to be nauseated by them; besides, an old criminal! It appeared to him a tedious and unnecessary waste of time.

The old gentleman had something much more interesting occupying his mind. He was expecting his daughter-in-law to present his son with a child. Let's see; what's this case all about? Oh, yes, an old criminal, named Theodore Laissac, aged fifty-seven, wanted by the police in connection with a mysterious crime at the villa of Monsieur and Madame Delanelle. The body found by a printer's assistant, named Adolf Roger, at 4.15 a.m. on the morning of the ninth on the pavement of the Place Duquesne. Witness informed Police.

Sub-Inspector Floquette attested to the finding of body as indicated by witness. The position of body directly under attic window, five stories high, occupied by deceased, suggesting that he had fallen or thrown himself therefrom. Good! Quite clear. A life of crime, result—suicide. Will it be a boy or a girl? Let us have the deceased's record.

A tall, square-bearded inspector stood up in the body of the court, and in a sepulchral voice read out the criminal life record of Theodore Laissac. It was not pretty reading. It began at the age of seventeen with the murder of the

Chinaman, Ching Loo, and thence onward it revealed a deplorable story of villainy and depravity. The recount of evil doings and the award of penalties became monotonous. The mind of Maxim Colbert wandered back to his son and his son's son. Would they send him a telegram? Or would the news come by hand?

What was that the counsel for the Rights of the Poor was saying? Chief-Inspector Tolozan wished to give evidence. Ah, yes, why not? A worthy fellow, Inspector Tolozan. He had known him for many years, worked with him on many cases—an admirable, energetic officer, a little given to theorizing; an interesting fellow, though. He would cross-examine him himself.

Inspector Tolozan took his place in the witness-box and bowed to the president. His steady grey eyes regarded the court thoughtfully as he tugged at his thin grey imperial.

"Now, Inspector Tolozan, I understand that you have this district in which this—unfortunate affair took place, under your own special supervision?"

"Yes, monsieur le president."

"You have heard the evidence of the witnesses Roger and Floquette with regard to the finding of the body?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Afterwards, I understand, you made an inspection of the premises occupied by deceased?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"At what time was that?"

"At six-fifteen, monsieur."

"Did you arrive at any conclusions with regard to the cause or motive of the —er—accident?"

"Yes, monsieur le president."

"What conclusions did you come to?"

THE ACCIDENT OF CRIME

"I came to the conclusion that the deceased, Theodore Laissac, met his death trying to save the life of a dog."

"A dog? Trying to save the life of a dog?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The president looked at the court, the court looked at the president and shuffled with papers, glancing apprehensively at the witness between times. The president cleared his throat.

"Indeed, Monsieur Tolozan, you came to the conclusion that the deceased met his death trying to save the life of a dog! Will you please explain to the court how you came to this conclusion?"

"Yes, monsieur le president. The deceased had a dog to which he was very devoted."

"Wait one moment, Inspector Tolozan. How do you know that he was devoted to this dog?"

"I have seen him with it. Moreover, during the years he has been under my supervision he has always had a dog, to which he was devoted. I could call some of his criminal associates to prove that, although he was frequently cruel to men, women and children, he would never strike or be unkind to a dog. He would never burgle a house guarded by a dog in case he had to use violence."

"Proceed."

"During that day or evening there had apparently been a slight subsidence in the chimney-place of the attic occupied by Laissac. Some brickwork had collapsed, leaving a narrow aperture, just room enough for a dog to squeeze its body through and get out on to the sloping leads of the house next door. The Widow Forbin, who occupies the adjoining attic, complains that she was kept awake for three hours that night by the whining of a dog on the leads above. This whining ceased about three-thirty, which

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must have been about the time that the deceased man met his death. There was only one way for a man to get from his attic to these leads, and that was by a rainwater pipe sloping from below the window at an angle of forty-five degrees to the roof next door. He could stand on this water-pipe, but there was nothing to cling to except small projections of brick, till he could scramble hold of the gutter above. He never reached the gutter."

"All this is pure conjecture, of course, Inspector Tolozan?"

"Not entirely, monsieur le president. My theory is that, after Laissac's departure, the dog became disconsolate and restless, as they often will, knowing by some mysterious instinct that his master was in danger. He tried to get out of the room, and eventually succeeded in forcing his way through the narrow aperture in the fireplace. His struggle getting through brought down some more brickwork and closed up the opening. This fact I have verified. Out on the sloping roof the dog naturally became terrified. There was no visible means of escape, the roof was sloping, and the night cold. Moreover, he seemed more cut off from his master than ever. As the Widow Forbin asserts, he whined pitiably.

"Laissac returned some time after three o'clock. He reached his attic. The first thing he missed was the dog. He ran to the window and heard him whining on the roof above. Probably he hesitated for some time as to the best thing to do. The dog leant over and saw him. He called to him to be quiet, but so agitated did he appear, leaning over the edge of that perilous slope, that Laissac thought every moment he would jump. Monsieur le president, nearly every crime has been laid at the door of the deceased, but he has never been accused of lack of physical

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courage. Moreover, he was accustomed to climbing about buildings. He dropped through that window and started to climb up the water-pipe."

"How do you know this?"

"I examined the water-pipe carefully. The night was dry, and there had not been rain for three days. Laissac had removed his boots. He knew that it would naturally be easier to walk along a pipe in his socks. There are the distinct marks of stockinged feet on the dusty pipes for nearly two metres of the journey. The body was bootless; the boots were found in the attic. But he was an old man for his age, and probably he had had an exhausting evening. He never quite reached the gutter."

"Are the marks on the gutter still there?"

"No; but I drew the attention of three of my subordinates to the fact, and they are prepared to support my view. It rained the next day. The body of the dog was found by the side of his master."

"Indeed! Do you suggest that the dog jumped—committed suicide, as it were?"

Tolozan shrugged his shoulders and bowed. It was not his business to understand the psychology of dogs.

Maxim Colbert was delighted. He thanked Tolozan profusely for his evidence. Once he glanced at the clock uneasily, and said pleasantly:

"Perhaps we may say of the deceased: he lived a vicious life, but he died not ingloriously."

The court broke up, and he passed down into a quadrangle at the back, where a pale sun filtered. Lawyers, ushers, court functionaries, and police officials were scattering, or talking in little groups. Standing outside a group he saw the spare figure of Inspector Tolozan. He touched his arm and smiled.

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"Well, my friend, what about this old criminal? The fact that he loved a dog—it's not a very great commendation. Many criminals do."

"But they would not give their lives, monsieur. A man who would do that is capable of—I mean to say, it was probably an accident that he was not a better man."

"What is your conjecture?"

Tolozan gazed dreamily up at the Gothic tracery of the adjoining chapel. Then he turned to Monsieur Colbert and said very earnestly:

"You must remember that there was nothing against Laissac until the age of seventeen. He had been a boy of good character. His father was an honest wheelwright. At the age of seventeen the boy was to go to sea on the sailing ship *La Turenne*. Owing to some trouble with the port authorities, the sailing of the ship was delayed twenty-four hours. The boy was given an hour's leave. He hung about the docks. There was nothing to do. He had no money to spend on entertainment. My conjecture is this: Let us suppose it was a quiet day like this, calm and sunny, with a certain quiet exhilaration in the air. The boy wanders around the quay and stares in the shops. Suddenly at the corner of the Rue Bayard he peeps down into a narrow alley and beholds a sight which drives the blood wildly through his veins."

"What sight, Inspector Tolozan?"

"The Chinaman, Ching Loo, being cruel to a dog."

"Ah! I see your implication."

"The boy sees red. There is the usual brawl and scuffle. He possibly does not realize his own strength. Follow the law court and the penitentiary. Can you understand how such an eventuality would embitter him against society? To him in the hereafter the dog would stand as the symbol

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of patient suffering, humanity as the tyrant. He would be at war for ever, an outcast, a derelict. He was raw, immature, uneducated. He was at the receptive age. His sense of justice was outraged. The penitentiary made him a criminal."

"Then from this you mean——"

"I mean that if the good ship *La Turenne* had sailed to time, or if he had not been given that hour's leave, he might by this time have been a master mariner, or in any case a man who could look the world in the face. That is what I mean by the accident of crime."



So So

BY

ELLIOT BAILEY

★

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The silver chime of the mantelpiece clock made Hugh Stavely look up. From it his glance travelled to George Flint's gross form sagging untidily in the opposite easy chair, his fat face like a red moon behind his cigar, his huge, beringed hand stretching at frequent intervals for the whisky which he noisily gulped down.

An unpleasant personality, Flint's, Stavely thought.

Once more his glance returned to the mantelpiece. Ten o'clock! Before eleven struck, if everything went well, George Flint would be dead.

Strange, he thought, how calmly he could toy with the idea now that he had made up his mind. He even regarded the other with an inward sardonic amusement. What, he wondered, would the fat man's reaction be if some telepathy could warn him that he had less than an hour to live?

He had done Flint well to-night; he felt he could afford to. The dinner had been one of his cook's best, and that was saying a lot. The cigar was a Corona; the whisky one of his last remaining bottles of pre-war strength.

Flint certainly could not complain that there was any

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niggardliness about his last evening's entertainment on this earth.

And Flint hadn't complained. Any irritation engendered by Stavely's failure to pay him the debt he owed had been mellowed by the good food and drink and by his host's categorical assurance that the money would be forthcoming next day after certain formalities in connection with his bank had been completed.

He had shoved back into his pocket the papers relating to the debt, and given himself up to the full enjoyment of the eating and drinking that his gross nature loved.

Catching Stavely's eye fixed upon him, he flung the butt of his cigar into the grate and grinned fatly.

"I could do with another, old man, if you think you can stand the strain," he suggested, and Stavely made haste to offer the box.

"Mix yourself another drink as well before you go," he invited.

Whereat Flint's eyes in their turn travelled to the clock as Stavely had meant them to do. He knew his host, from past experience, to be a creature of habit.

At ten-thirty sharp Gedge, the butler, would appear to ask if his master would require anything more. Whereupon Flint, or any other visitor Stavely might have, would be expected to rise and say he must go.

Gedge would then be requested to help the guest on with his things and see him off the premises, after which the butler could go to bed.

Stavely himself would follow his example in a few minutes. Bed at ten-thirty, he always said, was his invariable rule.

At Stavely's suggestion, Flint mixed himself another glass of grog, and since he knew it would be his last he did

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not stint the whisky. He had just finished it when, on the stroke of half-past ten, the butler softly entered the room.

"Is there anything more you'll be wanting, sir?" he asked.

Stavely rose to his feet. "Nothing more, Gedge," he said, "except to help Mr. Flint on with his coat. You were just going, weren't you, Flint?"

Flint scrambled up. He was not drunk, but he had taken as much as was good for him.

"Just going, old man, just going," he acquiesced. "Thanks for lovely dinner and all that. Good night, old man, good night; you won't forget that little bit of business to-morrow morning, eh?"

Stavely regarded him with cold eyes. He would have liked to remark that for some people to-morrow never comes.

"I shan't forget," he answered briefly. "Good night, old chap."

For the butler's benefit he shook hands warmly with the man he meant to kill in less than half an hour.

The closing of the front door told him that his guest had gone, and a moment later Gedge, stout, clean-shaven and bland, almost stage-like in his butlerly perfection, stood before him once more.

"I propose to retire now, sir," he stated.

Stavely nodded. "Very good, Gedge; the other servants have gone to bed, I suppose? Right; there's nothing more. Good night."

The man withdrew. Stavely listened until he heard the rather emphatic shutting of his bedroom door and then suddenly his whole demeanour seemed to change. His lithe frame tautened, his lips grew tight, the cold light in his eyes turned, as it were, to ice.

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Pausing only to switch off the lights, he fairly raced upstairs to his room, the door of which he shut with even more emphasis than the butler had employed, turning the key in the lock.

Opening a wardrobe, he took from it a light raincoat which he slipped over his dinner-jacket, and over that again he put on a peculiar dark grey garment which looked like a workman's overalls and had, indeed, been originally intended for that purpose.

Then, having drawn on a pair of grey cotton gloves, he unlocked a cupboard and from its interior produced a piece of lead tubing about two feet long.

Twice he swished this through the air as if testing its balance, and as he did so his pale eyes became even bleaker and more cruel. It had cost him nothing, this deadly weapon—he had picked it off a slag heap—but he intended it to save him the repayment of five thousand pounds.

A pair of rubber-soled shoes and a dark felt hat completed his attire. He glanced at the bedroom clock, which he had synchronized with the library one downstairs. Twenty to eleven! Good enough; Flint, in his fuddled state, would hardly be progressing very fast.

Behind the drawn blind, the lower sash of his window was already open. Snapping out the light, he drew up the blind without noise and swung himself over the sill. Just below his window was a pent-house roof. From this he dropped lightly to the ground.

He knew exactly what he meant to do. At the end of his garden a wicket-gate opened upon fields, a path across which formed a short cut to a sunken lane along which Flint would already be making his unsteady way.

Running swiftly through the darkness he crossed the fields. He had always kept himself in good condition, in

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marked contrast to the flabby Flint, and his breathing was still little more than normal when he reached the lane.

All the same, he realized that he had cut things closer than he thought. He could hear Flint's stumbling footsteps as he came along, still seemingly under the stimulating influence of the refreshment he had just enjoyed. He was singing under his breath, and the banal words of the song made Stavely's lips curl.

Flint never knew who struck him down. At one moment he was warbling his maudlin song, the next he was lying at Stavely's feet a dead and broken thing.

The murderer wasted no time in gazing at his handiwork. His eyes, by now accustomed to the gloom, showed on his right glove spots which could only be those of blood.

He drew the glove off before plunging his hand into the pocket into which he had seen Flint thrust what he knew to be the only paper in existence relating to the debt.

It was there, and he transferred it swiftly to one of his own pockets. Then, without a further glance at what lay at his feet, he strode a little farther down the lane until he came to a pond which also occupied its niche in his scheme of operations.

Into it he tossed the lead tubing, then made a bundle of the overalls and gloves, weighted it with stones, and flung it in also.

He did not greatly care if these things were discovered later. He had purchased the overalls and gloves months before from an East End second-hand clothes shop and he felt certain that neither they nor the tubing could ever be traced to him.

This little detail attended to, he struck straight back across the fields without approaching the body again.

He was conscious of no compunction. Rather had he the

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sensation of a great weight having been lifted off his mind. Flint's demands for that five thousand pounds had been growing importunate lately and had been quite impossible to meet. Well, he needn't let the matter worry him any longer.

Although he walked across the fields deliberately this time, it seemed to him that he reached his house in a very short period.

No light showed from any of the windows. His servants, he reflected with satisfaction, were doubtless already all asleep, blissfully unaware of their master's midnight prowling. Except for them, there was no one in the house, for Stavely was a bachelor.

To climb up on to the pent-house roof proved a little more difficult than jumping off it, but he managed it at last and a moment later was back in his room.

He pulled down the blind again over the open window, which he did not trouble to close in case it might make a noise. Then he turned on the light and surveyed himself minutely in the mirror.

What he saw satisfied him. Thanks to the overalls, there was not a speck of blood upon his clothing. His face, perhaps, was a little paler than he would have expected it to be. Still, murder might be expected to prove unsettling to even the best regulated nervous system.

He became conscious of a sudden thirst. The thought of the whisky decanter in the library was an alluring one.

In any case he meant to go down there to burn the paper he had murdered Flint to obtain. Not until that had been reduced to ashes would the night's work be complete.

Opening his door, he listened for a moment and then crept out. The house was still. Stealing down the stairs, he turned the handle of the library door and switched on the light.

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Then, his heart leaping violently, he stood transfixed.

A man occupying Flint's chair—that was his first almost incoherent thought—and for an instant something not far removed from superstitious dread swept over him. Then to his amazement he saw that it was Gedge, the butler.

Gedge, the bland, the immaculate, was stretched out very much at his ease, his feet to the fire, a glass containing more whisky than soda at his elbow. It was evident he had been enjoying the flickering firelight before his master's unexpected arrival.

Indignation at the sight overcame Stavely's initial consternation.

"So this is what you do, is it, directly my back is turned?" he exclaimed angrily. "Lucky I—I happened to come down again for once."

At the turning up of the light and the sound of his master's voice Gedge had sprung to his feet. Dismay showed itself on his face for the fraction of a second and then a truculence which was never far under the surface, despite his bland demeanour, took its place, intensified by the whisky he had drunk.

"Well, what about it?" he demanded. "Why shouldn't I take a drop if I feel inclined? Don't you and your pals guzzle it all the evening?"

Stavely clenched his fists, but his tone remained restrained and steady.

"Get to bed, Gedge," he ordered. "I'll talk to you in the morning when you're sober. But if you want to do any advance packing to-night you can, for you'll leave the house immediately after breakfast. You understand?"

The sneer deepened on the butler's countenance. Deliberately he eyed Stavely from head to foot, his glance

resting for a long moment on the incongruous shoes. Before speaking he backed to the door.

"Very high and mighty, aren't you?" he gibed. "*Paid Flint the money you owe him yet?*"

Despite himself, Stavely knew that he changed colour at the thrust. The realization of the fellow's knowledge was a staggering blow. Eavesdropping at keyholes must be another of Gedge's unsuspected accomplishments.

He took a quick step forward, but, prudently, the butler didn't wait. The door closed behind an exit that was more swift than dignified.

Stavely did not follow. Instead, he stood revolving in his mind this fresh development.

Gedge must have been in the habit of making these nocturnal onslaughts on his whisky. As for what he knew about Flint, did it greatly matter? Proof, not hearsay or tittle-tattle, was what Stavely had to fear, and when he had burnt the paper in his pocket there would be no proof.

The loan transaction had been between Flint and Stavely alone. Even the payment of the money had been in cash—Stavely had seen to that.

Flint was in the habit of drawing large sums to self which he squandered in dubious pleasures. Even five thousand more or less would raise no comment.

Going over to the fire, Stavely dropped into it the paper which represented his I.O.U. for the money, watched it transformed into ashes which in turn he stirred to virtual nothingness with the poker. Then he straightened up and stretched out his arms in vast relief.

The matter was finished, over. Gedge was a nuisance, perhaps even a complication, but, he told himself, he could deal with Gedge.

Picking up the decanter, he poured himself out a stiff

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dose and drank deeply. Good! That made him feel better. He refilled the glass and settled down to enjoy it at greater leisure.

He Gedge, meanwhile, ascended the stairs; hastily at first and then, when he saw that there was no pursuit, more slowly.

"Who'd have thought", he muttered, "that he'd ever have come down again? A proper turn I gave him, though, when I let out as I knew about him and Flint. Turned white as a sheet, he did! And what was he wearing them shoes on his feet for, I wonder?"

A sudden thought seemed to strike him, and before going on to his own room he opened Stavely's door and glanced inside.

At once the blind over the open window bellied out in the draught, and a queer expression flashed into the butler's narrow eyes which became intensified when he caught sight of the coat and hat flung carelessly on the bed.

"Been out of doors, if you asks me," he mumbled. "*And* through that window, too. What for?"

He stood irresolute for a moment and then hurried to his own room, where he scrambled into his hat and coat. From his window there was a sheer drop, but back in his master's room again he contrived to scramble on to the pent-house and thence to the ground, though his lack of Stavely's lithe agility made the task in his case a difficult one.

Then, breathing heavily, he waddled away into the darkness. The prospect of return did not worry him. There was a certain scullery window amenable to the persuasions of a pocket-knife which he had found useful before.

He did not go across the fields but followed the route he

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guessed Flint would have taken—down the drive, along a piece of main road, and then into the lane.

And there, where the path over the fields came out into the lane, he stumbled across Flint's body.

Striking a match, he gazed down at Stavely's handiwork and felt suddenly sick.

"Lord have mercy!" he murmured. "Is *this* what he came out to do?"

He started away, but a certain morbid curiosity took him back to the body again. Then cupidity and the thought of what Flint might be carrying overcame his squeamishness, and gingerly he inserted his hand into Flint's breast pocket and brought out a case of notes.

From these he selected a few of £1 denomination, which he understood could not be traced, and, reluctantly leaving alone those of higher value, replaced the case after wiping it with his handkerchief to obliterate any finger-marks he might have made.

It was while replacing it that his hand came into contact with a small round object he did not attempt to scrutinize at the moment, slipping it mechanically instead into his coat pocket.

Then he went off to find the police.

Having finished his drink, Stavely in his turn reascended the stairs. The Gedge contretemps was annoying, and his remark about Stavely's debt—or late debt, rather—a disconcerting one.

Nevertheless he was determined that there should be no faltering on his part. The butler should leave in the morning as he had told him. True, he might go about hinting at things, but no one was likely to pay much attention to the vapourings of a dismissed servant.

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He was not long in getting off his clothes, and once in bed sank, rather surprisingly, into a deep and undisturbed sleep—the combined result, probably, of whisky and fresh air. Gedge's entrance into his room in the morning awakened him—the butler acted as valet to him as well.

From Gedge's demeanour one would have said that the business of the night before had never happened at all. He was his old bland self as he drew up the blind so that the strong morning light fell full on his waking master's face.

Gedge watched him struggle into a sitting position before making his carefully prepared statement.

"Good morning, sir. I am afraid that I have some bad news for you this morning."

Stavely blinked. Not yet fully awake, this morning's proceedings were so like any other normal morning that the night's incidents were as yet nothing but a nebulous and faintly disturbing background to his mind.

"Bad news, Gedge," he echoed. "What d'you mean?"

"Poor Mr. Flint, sir. He was found last night—murdered!"

With a sudden rush of remembrance, Stavely found himself face to face with reality. He strove for self-control.

"Murdered! Flint! Good heavens! Who—who found him?"

Gedge was by this time back at the door.

"I did, sir," he murmured softly, and closed the door behind him.

Staring ahead of him, Stavely sat very still.

Then he dressed mechanically, his thoughts busy with this new and staggering development. How and when had Gedge discovered Flint? A cold shiver ran down his spine at the idea that the butler might have followed him across the fields and seen everything—even the delivery of the fatal blow.

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But he put this aside as impracticable. Gedge, when he had discovered him at the fireside, must have been there some time to get into the fuddled condition in which he was. It must, then, have been after this that he went out and found Flint. What had made him do it?

The shoes? It must have been the shoes that had given the game away—Stavely cursed himself for not having changed them before he went downstairs.

Probably, too, the man's cursed curiosity had taken him in to Stavely's room, where he had spotted the open window and the overcoat upon the bed. This had set him prowling outside on his own account. Thus did Stavely's reasoning bring him to the truth.

What, he wondered, had Gedge done after discovering the body? He could not ask him, for after dropping his bombshell the butler had not appeared again.

He had finished dressing when he made a discovery which perturbed him as much as Gedge's intelligence had done. He was slipping on his finger a single-stone diamond ring he habitually wore when he discovered that the stone was missing.

White-faced, he stared at the empty setting. When and where had the diamond fallen out? He had been wearing the ring, of course, the night before.

Feverishly he searched the room, looking for the stone in every possible and impossible place, but without result. Finally, he gave it up and, locking the ring in a drawer, went down to breakfast without it.

It would not have added to his peace of mind had he known that even while he was searching Gedge was examining the round, pebble-like object he had taken from Flint's pocket and was busy identifying it as the missing stone.

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Stavely was not altogether surprised on descending, to be told by a parlour-maid that the local superintendent of police was waiting to see him. Mastering with a great effort his inward qualms, he walked into the library where the officer was seated.

"Good morning, Superintendent," he said, in what he hoped would sound a natural tone. "I can guess what you have come about. Gedge has just told me the terrible news about poor Flint, which I confess I can hardly credit. It's true, I suppose? I don't know the details."

"True enough, I'm afraid, sir," the officer replied, and Stavely noted with relief that his voice appeared friendly. "Mr. Flint has undoubtedly been murdered—struck on the head by some blunt instrument we haven't yet discovered."

"Your man Gedge came across the body last night on his return, I understand, from a visit to the village cinema"—Stavely made no comment on this—"and very properly informed us at once."

"Mr. Flint, I gather, had been dining with you earlier in the evening?"

"He had," Stavely admitted. "He left about half-past ten to walk home. If only I could have guessed what was going to happen to him, I would have accompanied him, poor chap."

"This is a ghastly business. What appears to be the motive? Robbery, I suppose; Flint always carried more money about with him than I thought he ought to."

The policeman made a noncommittal movement of his hand.

"This man, Gedge," he queried, "you can vouch for him, I take it? A man of good character, eh?"

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"Excellent," Stavely answered. "You surely don't think . . . ?" Once more the superintendent brushed the suggestion aside.

"I don't know anything—yet," he countered. "You never heard Mr. Flint speak of any—er—enemies, I suppose? Anyone likely to do him harm?"

"I did not. Frankly, I don't think he was very popular, generally I mean. But enemies of that kind—no, I can't believe it."

He followed this up with a statement he hoped would sound bold and convincing.

"I sincerely trust you will find the scoundrel, or scoundrels, responsible for this, Superintendent. I believe you police have a theory that a murderer usually makes a fatal slip?"

The superintendent considered this.

"Well," he answered slowly, "speaking for myself, I'm inclined to think that it's not so much the fatal slip as some unlooked-for circumstance which often arises to throw the murderer's plans out of gear—the unforeseen, if you know what I mean."

He rose to his feet. "Thank you, sir," he said briskly, "I mustn't detain you from your breakfast any longer."

Whereat he departed, leaving Stavely wondering not so much at the questions he had asked, as at others he might have asked and hadn't.

Breakfast, Stavely noticed, was brought in by a parlour-maid.

"Where's Gedge?" he demanded.

The girl eyed him rather strangely.

"Mr. Gedge, sir, has just left the house, carrying a bag. He told me to give you this, sir."

She handed him an envelope which Stavely did not attempt to open until she had left the room.

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"You sacked me last night," he read, "and so I have taken you at your word and retired to the village pub—I've an idea the house may not be too healthy for me just now."

"But if you want to discuss anything with me—particularly a diamond I found last night in a certain murdered man's pocket—I shall be at Wright's Hollow at ten o'clock to-night."

Stavely read and re-read this note, and all at once he shivered. There recurred to him the superintendent's remark anent the unforeseen and whither it so often led. The unforeseen, it seemed to him, had cropped up in this case with a vengeance.

He discovered little appetite for his breakfast.

Superintendent Haines was closeted with Inspector Walters. "This man Gedge", the inspector remarked, "will bear watching. I understand he's taken up his quarters at the Royal Arms, is drinking heavily, and talking a lot."

"He says Stavely sacked him for pilfering his whisky, but that he knows something about Stavely that will get him back his job and put Stavely under his thumb. A bit queer, that, isn't it?"

"Quite queer," the senior police officer agreed. "So it was when I told Stavely that Gedge said he had been to the local kinema. He hadn't, and Stavely must have known that he hadn't."

"I elicited from the other servants that Gedge saw Flint off the premises at half-past ten. Yet Stavely didn't think it worth while apparently to contradict the statement."

"A case of collusion, eh?" the inspector hinted.

"I don't know, but you're quite right in suggesting that Gedge had better be watched. Put a couple of plain-clothes

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men on to him and tell them to stick to him like a leech. He may unwittingly lead us to something."

Wright's Hollow—a grassy, saucer-like depression in the heart of a tiny wood—seemed sinister enough for any clandestine tryst to Stavely when he entered it.

All day long the feeling of subtle danger hanging over him had weighed him down. He had seen nothing more of the police, but in some ways would have been happier if he had, if he could have learnt what steps they were taking in the matter of Flint's death.

He had barely accustomed himself to the gloomy spot when he first heard, and then dimly saw, the approach of a bulky figure.

"That you, Gedge?" he asked.

"Who else d'you think it would be?" came the truculent reply. Gedge, it was evident, had been fortifying himself at the bar before setting out.

"Well, what do you want?" Stavely demanded sharply. The butler chuckled.

"What I told you in that note—to talk to you about the diamond I found in Flint's pocket."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Ho, don't you? You haven't lost no diamond, have you? I didn't happen to notice it wasn't in your ring when you sacked me last night, did I? It couldn't have got torn off when you lugged something out of Flint's pocket, could it?"

"The answer to all those questions is 'Yes', Mr. Stavely. I recognized that stone—seen it often enough to do so, I can tell you. What's more, the jeweller who recently reset it would recognize it also. Now, suppose I showed it to the police?"

Stavely breathed hard, but he still remained cool.

"Well," he said quietly, "suppose you did—what then?"

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"You know what would happen, then," the other snarled, "well enough for all your pretence; they'd find the bloke as killed Flint. But I won't show it to the police—on conditions."

"You mean?"

"I want my job back."

"You can have it."

Gedge laughed in triumph.

"So you admit the diamond's yours?"

"I admit nothing. Still, you can take back your job."

The butler sneered. "Thank you for nothing, Mr. Blooming Stavely. There's something else I want beside my job."

"And that is?"

"Five thousand pounds—the five thousand pounds you thought you'd got out of paying Flint."

A queer silence fell between the two tensely-strung men. In a flash Stavely's quick imagination pierced the future—a blackmailer fastened on him for all earthly time, that first demand for five thousand followed by another, and then another, until he was drained dry. Anything would be better than that.

He flung himself at Gedge's throat.

The struggle was short. Stavely's strangling fingers had already choked the life from the butler's flabby frame when the police who had trailed Gedge sprang from their concealment and seized his murderer.

Handcuffed, Stavely stared down at what he had done in bitter resignation. He might yet have got away with the first crime, but there was no explaining this. He recalled the superintendent's dictum, so faithfully fulfilled.

From first to last in this business Gedge had truly typified the unforeseen.

~~Sanctuary~~ Fair

BY

THOMAS BURKE

★

THE BLACK COURTYARD

Nobody saw him. In the late evening of that winter night he came creeping from that riverside courtyard—a courtyard thick with darkness, and alive only with silence and the eyes of blind houses; and nobody saw him. He was slim, and his body in movement was elastic. He walked with a rhythmic padding step. He presented himself to the eye as a heavy overcoat, a soft hat and a muffler.

That night, in all parts of London, was a night of intense darkness; starless and heavy with rain. But in the east the already dark streets were put to confusion by a river-mist. In this mist the lamps were dabs of phosphorescence. The shop-lights blest only a foot of the pavement, and even the torches of the stalls could achieve no more than a luminosity which was no light at all. Belated shoppers moved in and out of the little shops in the form of floating faces. The narrow thoroughfare was populous with the creatures of all nations, but amid the shifting veils of mist one could not know white man from Cingalese, nor yellow man from negro, nor honest man from skulker. They were no more than spectral shapes of Man. This

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Perrace, the muffled figure coming from the courtyard, was one of them.

Nowhere was the darkness more intense than there. So intense was it that it seemed to have a quality of life. It menaced the eyes and pressed upon the face. Its silence seemed to whisper upon the ears. It was an organism of blackness whose tendrils almost throttled the breath. But to Perrace and his purposes this profusion of darkness was kind.

As he came from the courtyard the river sent out the howl of a fog-horn, and from distant byways came the cries of roysterers. A banjo could be heard; a gramophone; an over-tuned radio. Thick, rough life, and the rumour of unseen life, surged all about him, but Perrace, padding his solitary way, was concerned with death. He padded along the High Street. He padded up Love Lane. He padded along Cable Street and along Brook Street, and as he passed from one street to another the tempo of his padding increased and gave him the air of one in flight.

He *was* in flight. He was fleeing not from fear of arrest but from a courtyard thick with darkness, deaf to noise, and alive only with the eyes of blind houses. Those houses had seen nothing; in that darkness they could not, even unshuttered, have seen; yet their very blindness had shot him with a deeper fear than the fear of capture. They and the courtyard in which they stood were before him now. They were like figures threatening him. They seemed to say "We didn't see, but we *know*. And we're going to make you pay." In the effort to shake them from his eyes he padded faster and faster. He turned into Stepney Causeway, and loped along it, and did not fall to his customary rhythm until he came out to the misty glitter and clamour of Commercial Road.

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There he paused, uncertain of his next action. But his mind told him that action was imperative; he must not linger; he must not be seen here. He debated by which way he should return home, but so many ways came to his mind that he could not decide upon one for thought of the others. Then, when he had hesitated some two minutes, a string of westward buses, lumbering out of the mist, settled the matter for him. Their presence brought him out of his paralysis; with automatic movements he boarded the first of them and climbed to the top. He sat down with a heavy sigh.

Life on a sudden seemed unaccountably strange. He was still alive, breathing through his nose, seeing with his eyes; yet his state of being was not the state of being of a few hours ago. He was sitting on a bus, a bus like other buses, yet charged to his mind with some intense and un-bus-like essence. Like that courtyard and that darkness and those houses, it seemed alive. This was Perrace sitting on the bus—Perrace; himself yet not himself. The same hair, the same eyes, the same hands, the same stream of conscious memory; yet a Perrace who was a stranger to him. At the bottom of his mind was a faint feeling, or perhaps a faint hope, that soon he would wake up and find himself warm and comfortable in bed in his little back room in Kingsland Road. The top of his mind knew that he wouldn't. He looked down at his overcoat. It was his overcoat, his quite ordinary overcoat. Since the day he bought it he had never really seen it. Now he saw it and the coat too seemed to come to life. He had put it on that afternoon as casually as he had always put it on. But that was before the Idea had come to him. He knew that he would not take it off casually. It was now an experienced overcoat, a dramatic overcoat; it had been in that court-

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yard. It might even become a famous overcoat. At that thought he shivered and felt sick. Events of the last two hours recurred to him. They had the complexion of truth which is insistently truth but incomprehensible by human reason. That accursed courtyard had created them.

He recalled the courtyard and he recalled the dark room and he recalled the bent, questioning figure of the old man, and he recalled the old man lying still and pulseless on the floor; and he recalled the escape by the window. He recalled how often he had haunted that courtyard, and how often the courtyard had haunted *him*. He recalled how it had set things in his mind; how it had lived there, peacefully malignant, suggesting sin, but never suggesting the price of sin; how it had beckoned him to give it the story for which it was made. He recalled the many times when he had looked into it and looked at a certain house, and had thought of the hundreds of notes which the stupid, feeble old man was known to hoard; notes which meant so much to one who was temporarily out of a job. He recalled how he had planned the affair over drinks in the—what was the name of the place? He recalled how he had first brushed the idea aside—the mere thought had given him a fit of tremors—and how, later, he had giped at himself for a coward and screwed himself up to it. He recalled how clear it had been in his mind during the long evening. It was when he had come to set it to action that it had gone blurred and feverish. Coming out of the courtyard had been like a waking-up. He could not recall entering the house; he could only dimly recall being there. He could not recall what he had started to do; he could only recall what had been done. He could not recall what desk or cupboard or safe he had opened;

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he could not even recall the contents of the room; he could only recall its darkness and its shape. He could not recall finding the money, nor, if he found it, what he had done with it; he knew only that he had brought none of it away. He could not recall the entrance of the miser to the room; he could only recall the patch on the dark floor. The two really vivid memories were of going into the courtyard, and again of coming out of it. Once or twice he had a feeling that it had never happened, but in the moment of the feeling a stab of memory told him that the feeling was merely a reflection of his agonized wish. He was suffering and making forlorn efforts to escape the suffering.

Above the imps of thought that were dancing on his brain hovered the word MURDER. It seemed ludicrous, insane, almost, that that word could be fastened to the name of Perrace. This Perrace was known to his few acquaintances as a fellow like other fellows, a fellow who had no life beyond the life society allows to a poor man—the life of a steady worker, a respectable ten o'clock to six o'clock employee who held no opinions to attract remark, who did nothing to-day that would be remembered to-morrow, and to whom nothing outside routine ever happened. And now he had broken the bounds of routine and opened them to the claws of peril and dread.

Never again could he sleep securely. Never again could he walk the streets carelessly. Life and death had broken in upon his coma, and he, who had hitherto faced only the shadow of them, must now, through the memory of a black courtyard, face the reality. And he was not ready to face it. He had acted before he had reached the mood for action; he was unprepared. He hadn't *meant* to do it. Yet they would brand him, and if they seized him they

would talk about him as though he were an animal and not Perrace, the ordinary likeable fellow. And then they would kill him. He had always been assured, as most of us are, that while other men might commit murder he, old Perrace, never could. He had read in news papers of men who committed murder, but he had read of them as monsters, remote creatures of another plane, not as fellow-creatures of the world he lived in. They were not men who rode in buses and worked in offices and were sometimes out of a job and sat in tea-shops and went to whist-drives and did a bit of gardening on Saturday afternoons. They were Murderers; something apart. Yet this night he had been presented in that courtyard with his own self in that shape, a self which he knew was his but which he could not recognize; a self from which he revolted. Perrace, the ordinary likeable fellow, turned, within an hour, into a creature who belonged in that affrighting gallery in the basement of Tussaud's.

It was ludicrous. It was like a tale of a millionaire forging a cheque for ten pounds. But a persistent spot in his brain said "Yes; but true". His quiescent mind said: "It isn't. It isn't. I didn't do it. I didn't do it." His active mind drowned it with "You did. You did. You may not have meant to, but you did."

Under these conflicting mental revolutions he suffered a bilious loathing of his own existence, and a horror of the black courtyard. It was beginning to torment him. It danced in his mind, and his mind interpreted it to his sight and his body as clammy shadows touching his skin. In that long ride through Stepney, Aldgate and the City, he saw, wherever he looked, a courtyard thick with darkness, deaf to noise and alive only with the eyes of blind houses. A courtyard that might tempt a man and encourage him

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to all manner of enormities; a courtyard that had, he was certain, done so.

He left the bus at the Bank, and caught a last bus for Shoreditch. He was aware that he moved rationally and spoke rationally, but this behaviour, he knew, came from the last automatic movements of his real self. That self, the self he had known these thirty years, was now lying numb and bemused. It seemed to be fading from him. His being was slowly passing into possession of this new stranger-self. He did not like this new self, and he fought against surrendering to it. But there was no question of his surrendering. It was insistently taking possession of him—a nervous, feverish self that had crept out of a courtyard thick with darkness and deaf to noise. He wondered whether all murderers were possessed like this. From their behaviour in court he felt that they were not. Murder seemed to make them stronger instead of weaker, more callous instead of more sensitive.

In his room in Kingsland Road he took off his overcoat and hung it on a peg. From the other side of the room he turned to look at it. It seemed to look back at him. He took off his boots, and looked at them, and they, too, seemed different from other boots; mighty and terrible boots. At any moment, he foolishly felt, coat and boots might become articulate. The sight of them began to fret his already fretted mind. He gathered them up and stowed them into a cupboard. For the next half-hour he padded about the room. From time to time he brushed his arm across his eyes. Somewhere on his retina was the image of a black courtyard. He went to the mirror to see if he could find it; then realized his own folly, and gave a weak laugh, and again felt sick.

Under this sickness he crept to the bed and fell on it,

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Revised by P. J. [unclear]
and, not expecting sleep, slept. But in the sleep he was aware that he was sleeping on the bare stones of a black courtyard. He awoke as Perrace, to some shreds of his own self not yet destroyed; but in a few seconds, when fully awake, he realized that he was no longer Perrace. He was a creature out of a black courtyard, and he existed only in relation to that courtyard. He was its prisoner. Over-riding the memory of last night's affair was the more awful presence of this manifestation. He was in the world but he was enclosed from it. He could see it only through the shadows of his courtyard. He strove to shoulder it away by movement. He got up and exercised himself. He plunged his head and neck into cold water. He rubbed himself. He felt too sick to eat the breakfast his landlady had prepared, but he drank two cups of tea and nibbled some bread. At nine o'clock he went out and walked wherever the streets led him.

Throughout that day, he loafed about the main streets of the poorer quarters. He wandered from Oxford Street to St. John's Wood, from there to Camden Town, then to Finsbury Park, to Highgate, then to Islington, to Euston Road, to Charing Cross, to Waterloo Road, to Kennington, to Camberwell, to Peckham. After some hours of walking at his gentle padding pace, his mind cleared, and things began to adjust themselves. In the light he regained something of his old self, a little of the everyday confidence he had known before yesterday. He began to feel that he had exaggerated the affair and his own fears. In the afternoon sun the black courtyard seemed far away in distance and in time. Neither the morning papers nor the evening papers contained a line about that courtyard. No doubt in a day or two it would fade from his mind as other incidents faded from the mind.

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Within a month he would perhaps have to make an effort to recall anything about that courtyard. It might be weeks yet before the secret was discovered, and there would be nothing by which they could connect it with him.

But when night came upon the city he learned that the courtyard was only beginning its work upon him. He had not noted the approach of night, and he was walking along Rye Lane, Peckham, when the horror came upon him. The haunting took material shape. He was certain that it was Rye Lane; he had seen its name on a plate at a corner; yet, turning suddenly from a brilliant shop-window, he found that he was not in Rye Lane. Shops and lights had disappeared; *he was in that black courtyard*. He could feel its darkness upon his face, he could hear its crowding silence, he could see the sightless eyes of its houses. A choking sickness came to his throat, and he turned in panic to get out of it. He tore down the alley and into the street from which it led. As he ran he was aware of shouts and noises. Dimly he saw scared faces about him, and heard the grinding of brakes. He had a vision of a tram-car striking his shoulder, of a taxi-driver making faces. But they were mere phantasmagoria floating across that fact of the black courtyard, and he gave them no attention. Every nerve of him was centred on getting out of that courtyard.

But he was not to get out of it. He was its prisoner. He thought he had got out of it, but on crossing the road and taking the first turning, he found he was in it again. There it was, in Peckham, clear to the eye—a riverside courtyard thick with darkness. This time he fought his way out of it, and stood at its entrance, gasping. Shadows passed him and an elfin voice came out of the air: "How's a chap get like that so early in the evening? Quick work,

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eh?" The words, faint as an echo in a valley, suggested something to him, and for some time he could not locate the suggestion. Then it came to him in clear terms—a drink. A drink was what he wanted. He hadn't had one all day, and he hadn't eaten much. A drink might rid him of this horror. But the idea of a drink brought a crowded, noisy bar, and he could not face a crowded, noisy bar. He wondered whether there was a quiet, side-street place near by. Just then a little man was passing the mouth of the alley. He stopped him. "Er—could you tell me if there's a quiet little bar anywhere near here? A quiet little place a respectable man can go to?" The man looked at him. "Why, yes. But a respectable man can go anywhere, can't he? Still, if you want a quiet place, just go up here and take the first on the left. There's a nice snug little place there." He thanked the little man and went swiftly up the half-lit road. Projecting from the corner of the first turning on the left he saw a signboard—"The Anchor & Hope." Reaching it, he turned the corner, anticipating the soothing effect of the drink. He turned the corner, and walked into a courtyard thick with darkness and deaf to noise.

He came out of it cursing the little man and sobbing. He fell into a loping run. He pressed his fingers to his eyes and rubbed his face. He uttered automatic noises. His voice said "Damn, damn, damn", and many coarser words.

In a long lamplit street his breathing made him pause, and looking about him he saw that the street was a street and the lamps were lamps. He took off his hat and rubbed his hands around his head. Nerves, he told himself; nerves; just nerves. That's what it was. That courtyard wasn't there, couldn't be. An attack of nerves. He was

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just seeing it. Well, he wouldn't see it. It wasn't there at all. It was just nerves; nerves; nerves.

But with that discovery he found that he had admitted another enemy. He had admitted a word, and the word, once admitted, hammered on his brain until even the haunting of the courtyard seemed less horrible. It walked with his feet, and beat with his pulse, and floated before his eyes; Nerves . . . Nerves . . . Nerves . . . Nerves. The shape of the word, as it spelt its letters before him, was of something spidery and ghastly. The sound of it became like a wail from a lunatic asylum. Nerves . . . Nerves . . . Nerves. . . . Or like the last rush of breath from a dying old man. Nerves . . . Nerves . . . Nerves . . . Eugh . . . Eugh . . . Eugh. . . .

"You better go home," he told himself. "You better go home. That's the best place."

He went home. Somehow he found his way back to Kingsland Road. He went on buses that glided through one black courtyard after another, and he walked through black courtyards. In a shop in one of these courtyards he bought a quart bottle of stout, and at last he came to his room in a black courtyard and the room itself was a black courtyard. He sat on the bed in that courtyard, and said "Oh . . . Oh. . . ." and "Oh, dear. . . . Oh, dear. . . . Oh, if only. . . ." He poured out a half-pint glass of the stout, and drank it off. It soothed him, and within a few minutes the room began to resume the features of his room. He drank another glass, and sat with his hands limply hanging over his knees. "I must be going mad. I must be going mad. Oh, if only. . . ." He took another glass, and soon the stout, working upon the exhaustion of the day's walk, brought sleepiness. It brought, too, the complete removal of the courtyard. As he sat there, it faded from eye and

mind, and all that he could see resolved itself into his own familiar room.

But in sleep it came back. It came back in all its details. The courtyard itself, the shuttered house, the dark room, the bent old man. They danced and whirled about his consciousness. They were figures; they were colours; they were sounds; they were smells. They changed their form, they changed their character, they shifted from solid to vapour. But always, whatever their form or figuration, in their impact upon the brain they were black courtyard, shuttered house, dark room, bent old man. It seemed that he had not finished with them. It seemed that they were beckoning him. At times their attitude penetrated to his consciousness as friendly and encouraging. It seemed that there was something they wanted of him. But when he awoke he awoke with a moan and a gasp and a sensation of choking.

The day repeated the day before. In the thin winter sunlight he was safe, but once the night had come the courtyard fastened upon him and enclosed him. London was one black courtyard. Beyond it he could see gleaming tram-cars and blazing shops and streets crowded with warm faces; but he could reach none of them. He could not get out. He could only pad round and round his courtyard, moaning.

Late in the evening an idea came to him. "See a doctor. . . . See a doctor." Somewhere within the courtyard, a few paces back, he had noted a brass plate. With some trouble he found it again, and fifteen minutes later he was sitting in a pleasant consulting room. The atmosphere of the room, the furniture, the bright fire, restored him a little. Here were peace and warmth and light; nothing foolish, it seemed, could live here. This was a haven to

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which the courtyard could not penetrate; an oasis of sanity and sense.

By the time the doctor came in he was collected and calm. He gave a fictitious name and address as easily as though it were his own, and began to state his case.

"Know anything about nerves, doctor?"

"A good deal of the little we can know. What's the trouble?"

"Haunted."

"H'm. I see. Being followed about, eh?"

"Oh, no. . . . No. Not that. But . . . wherever I go I see a dark courtyard. A dark courtyard. It seems to close me in, like."

"H'm. Well, there's lots of dark courtyards in London. You *would* see a lot anyway, if you go about much."

"Funny, but I feel all right here. This is the first place I've been free of it at night. It doesn't seem able to get at me here. Perhaps it can't come where there's strong people. I wonder if you could give me——" His voice stopped dead. His eyes were staring past the doctor. "Oh God—look—it's there. It's there!" He was half-way from his chair, his hand pointing to something behind the doctor. "The window! I can see it outside the window!" The doctor did not look towards the window. He kept his eyes on his patient. "What is it you're seeing?" "It's there—outside the window—the black courtyard. All dark. And little houses."

"Yes, yes. Of course. Yes."

"What d'you mean—yes—yes? Look yourself. Look through that window. Tell me what's really there."

"A dark courtyard. With little houses."

"You—you—I—you playing with me? Humouring me?"

"Nonsense, man. If I look out of that window I can see

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a dark courtyard with little houses. Same as you can. Of course I can. I've been seeing it every night these twelve years."

"It's there, then?"

"Of course it's there. . . . Now then—sit down. Take it easy. Let's try the old reflexes."

There was a ten-minute examination. The doctor went to his desk and made some notes. He turned to his patient. "What you want is a change. A complete change and a rest. You're just on the edge of a breakdown. But before you can get anything out of change and rest you must get this thing off your mind. You've got a dark courtyard on your mind. Something unpleasant happened to you in a courtyard. You needn't tell what. Well, the best thing you can do is to go back to that courtyard and——"

"Go back?"

"Yes. Don't look so scared, man. It's the straightest way. Go back to that identical courtyard at night. And face whatever it's got. Go over it all again in that identical spot. Challenge it."

"You don't know what you're asking me."

"I know I'm asking you to make a drastic effort. But it's the only way. Nerves are like mad dogs. Run away and they'll get you. Face 'em, and you're all right. You must go back to that place. At night, mind you. Face it out, man. And if you face it and go over whatever happened there, you'll probably find the second experience will cancel the first. A mental medicine."

"I don't think I could. You don't understand——"

"Oh yes, you could. Anyway, try it. I can suggest nothing else. *I* can't rid you of this thing. Only yourself can do that."

For five nights more he lived with his horror. Through

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the orchestration of his waking and sleeping life it recurred and persisted like a main theme gone wild. Life, once an affair of light beat and homely tune, had become a tune upon a black courtyard. And it seemed that there was no stopping it. Nothing he could do would obliterate it. Memory operated upon nothing else. It carried it and dandled it and frisked it under his very eyes, until his surface and his core were a black courtyard at midnight.

It was not until his whole being had become a scream of "What can I do? What can I do?" that he saw the only thing to do. A perilous thing, certainly, but a thing that would lead at least to escape from *this*. He could live no longer with it. If, then, death was the only escape, he must take that way. But not by the river or the gas fire. Those ways were certain and fixed. The doctor's way was almost certain, but it was the "almost" that decided him to take it. If the police were waiting for him, expecting him, as a bungling amateur, to follow popular tradition and return to the place, well, that way of ending, hideous as it was, could be no worse than this present horror. And it might be . . . it might be that they were not waiting for him. He had searched each day the morning and evening papers, but never a line had he seen about any discovery in any court by the river. It might be that nothing had become known. It might be that the doctor's advice was sound; that this one secret visit would indeed ease him of his burden. Suppose he risked it?

With that, a calm resolution came to him. His spirits rose. His nerves ceased their jangling and relapsed into harmony. He would risk it and he would go that night. It seemed a propitious night—the exact week from *the* night—and it would at least mean action and a result of some sort.

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So at eleven o'clock that night he went. In Kingsland Road the air was clear, but by the river there was again a mist, and again he passed through its streets as no more than a heavy overcoat, a soft hat and a muffler. He found himself strangely careless of what might be waiting for him, and he walked with his usual padding step. He felt in good health—confident and strong; and when he came to the little street from which the alley led he walked lightly down it. He turned swiftly into the alley and walked lightly along it, and came once more into a courtyard thick with darkness, deaf to noise, and alive only with the eyes of blind houses.

For some seconds he stood still. But he saw nothing to alarm him, and heard nothing; and with a light step he moved to the house in the corner.

There he waited. He looked round the court—challenged it, dared it. It made no demonstration. It did not threaten him. It did not frighten him. It was a court only, like other courts. Now that he was there, it seemed well disposed towards him. He wondered how he could have been so foolish as to let it weigh upon his mind. He must have been out of sorts last week.

He turned again to the little house. Yes; this was where he had stood, just at this shutter, just above this grating that made a right angle with the basement window. He bent to the grating and listened. No sound at all came to him—only a whispering wave of silence. He touched the grating, and found it as loose as he had left it last week. It would lift easily. He lifted it, and as he lifted it a light of memory lit his mind. He stood with it in his hand, and remembered that this was exactly how he had stood a week ago when he had come over faint. Exactly—the same attitude, the same finger of the left hand supporting the

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grating, the same movement of the right arm towards the window, the same——

And then he found himself in action. He had not directed himself to this action, but he *was* in action. He was underneath the grating, crouching in the tiny aperture before the window. His knife was working on the catch of the window. The catch slid back. With delicate fingers he lowered the window, and within four seconds he was in the house.

He switched on his torch, and its darting light showed him a dirty unkempt kitchen. But here the blaze of memory blurred and faded. He could not recall this kitchen. He moved the torch and it showed him a door and a staircase. He could not recall this staircase, but even while trying to recall it he found himself ascending it with his rhythmic padding. He reached the top, and saw a passage leading to the front door, and in the passage two other doors, and another staircase. This again was strange to him, but he found himself on those stairs, going softly up, and he found himself in another and tinier passage, also with two doors. He found himself trying the handle of one of them, and working upon its lock with a wire key. And then he found the door open and himself in the room.

He darted his torch about the room and saw a chest and a bureau and a copper box. He went first to the chest, worked upon its lock, and routed among its contents. He was blank of all thought and all feeling; blank of all memory of repeating last week; blank of all concern of the dead old man. He was just an organism of action. At the bottom of the chest his hand touched a packet that rustled. He brought it out, and his torch showed him what it was. He thrust it into his pocket and dived again, and found another and another. Pound-notes in packets. The chest

yielded three more packets; then, when he felt that he had exhausted it, he turned to the bureau. A few twists of his wire key opened it, and he dived his hand into its drawers. His hand found more and more, and he filled his pockets with them.

It was just when he was turning from the bureau to the copper box that he heard a sound; scarcely a noise; just that faint disturbance of the air which is made by the presence of a living creature. He turned his torch to the floor, and with an undirected movement reached to the fireplace. His hand found a fire-iron. As his fingers closed upon it, he turned swiftly and shot the beam of the torch at arm's length towards the door.

It showed, just inside the door, the bent figure of a grizzled old man.

At that sight he knew what he had to do. He was ready for it now.

The old man shuffled three paces towards him, and Perrace took one pace to the old man. From behind his back the fire-iron came down on the bent head—one . . . two . . . the old man fell . . . three . . . four . . . five.

He dropped the fire-iron and stepped back. His breath came out in a long rush, and with it came all the weight that had pressed so heavily upon him. In that moment some immaterial shuttles seemed to re-adjust themselves and bring into orderly being the Perrace he had always known. But a somewhat stronger Perrace; a Perrace who knew his rights and was not afraid to take them. He was conscious of elation and of power. Nothing could now touch him. No courtyard held any terrors for him. He had rounded upon his haunting and turned it into fact. The live idea he had killed, as he had killed the old man. It was now a dead fact.

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He shot the light of the torch upon the old man to satisfy himself that the thing was fully done; then switched off the torch, buttoned his coat, and gently felt his way down the stairs.

He came out from the basement window into a courtyard thick with darkness, and alive only with silence and the eyes of blind houses. This time it said nothing to him. He scarcely noticed it. It was just a place where he had pulled off a bit of overdue business. He padded from it into the alley, and so into the misted side-streets, and melted into other narrow streets until he appeared in firm shape at Fenchurch Street station. There, mixing with the crowd coming from a late Tilbury train, he took a taxi to Soho, and from Soho another taxi to Euston. From Euston he took a bus to Dalston, and from there walked home.

In his room he made a close examination of his clothes, and found that he had been lucky. He stowed his money away in a suit-case and two boxes, and softly whistled a little tune. He went to bed, and slept better than he had slept for many weeks.

He slept until ten o'clock, when his landlady woke him to tell him that two important-looking men wanted to see him.

Handwritten signature

M. Law

Good

BY

HYLTON CLEAVER

★

BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE
MURDERED MAN

Arching his back a little, dipping his pen with an annoying preciseness into the ink, Stephen P. H. Moreton began to write neatly in the journal which he had always kept under lock and key. He would fill several pages, and when he had finished he would cut these pages out and post them; then nobody could get at them but the authorities.

At the top of the page he wrote:

"Whosoever first reads this statement is advised to take it without delay to Scotland Yard. The reasons will be obvious." Then he signed his name, and did so with a certain flourish and some pride, because in a very little while his name would be exceedingly well-known. Or so he hoped.

After that he began his statement, and this is what he wrote:

There is a week-end party in progress here and it is not a great success; for one thing, there is at it a man whom everyone dislikes, to wit, myself. I have been told that I am something between an excellent anarchist and

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a villainous king, and I still recall that tribute with self-satisfaction. But the failure of this house party can be traced far beyond my presence. It is due in great part to the persistent inability of modern people to amuse themselves, coupled with their insatiable desire for entertainment.

There seems to be only one topic of conversation: "What are we going to do now?" And nobody can give any answer without starting disagreement.

This is a country house, and my sisters—poor crushed women—are hostesses, my weak-willed brother and myself are hosts, and for once the party was my own idea; this has taken everybody by surprise, and they are wondering why I suggested it, and what they are supposed to do. They are all sitting about and waiting for something to happen, and sometimes they catch me eyeing them, which makes them feel uncomfortable. My power to make people feel uncomfortable is a great source of amusement to me, expecially in trains.

If they only knew it, I suggested this party because I myself wanted to be entertained, and for a very good reason. Three months ago I was sentenced to death by a man who pronounced judgment in a consulting-room in Upper Wimpole Street. Kindly but firmly he diagnosed a tumour on the brain, and when he found what type of man I was, and that I insisted on the truth, he allowed me to drag out of him the essential fact that three months was likely to see the end of me. Well, those three months are up to the day, and I had earmarked this as my last week-end. Instead of turning out a wonderful party for my benefit, the whole affair is falling singularly flat. Of course they know nothing of this, beyond the fact that periodically I have headaches; to these they put down my

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nasty temper. If I were addicted to self-pity I should think the failure of this party a rather pathetic thing. Fortunately, I dislike pity of any sort, but can stand anyone's pity better than my own.

I have come indoors because I can see that my hand is to be forced. They cannot amuse themselves and they will not amuse me. I am host, and so as my last gesture I must make plans against my will for the entertainment of my own guests, in which case it shall be the best I can provide. The week-end, in spite of their incompetence, shall be unforgettable. There shall be a murder.

I have never trusted other people to do for me the things I could do better for myself, and I do not see why the leading character in a murder case should necessarily be the murderer; the whole thing is surely better devised if he be the murdered man; if, in fact, he has carried out all the arrangements to suit his own requirements, with what they call a good sense of the theatre.

I am due to die, and I do not like facing the probability that I shall do so in an untidy manner, by passing out in a Tube train or falling down in the street. I cannot bear the thought of lying about waiting to be identified, whilst a morbid crowd peers down at me pending the arrival of the ambulance. I prefer to end it myself and in my own way. I will be found dramatically dead, and the guests need ask no longer "What shall we do?" They can apply themselves to the exciting task of eluding the keen suspicion that they *have* done something—namely, *this*. It isn't going to look like suicide.

In a sense I suppose my demise will mean the end of the party; but not immediately, and not, at all events, to-night. The police will see that nobody leaves until they are satisfied, and this will be a matter of some difficulty, be-

cause this is a party at which anybody might quite easily and willingly have killed me. On which of them, I wonder, will the guilt be fastened?

Arthur Bush has written me a letter, saying: "One day I believe I shall choke you, Stephen; and how I shall enjoy it!"

Then there is Barbara Cardell. I am attracted by women who think me repulsive; they signify a challenge which I seldom decline. I am not addicted to amours of a facile sort, but I enjoy the experience of capturing a woman who is terrified of my touch. For this reason I gladly admit in this last chapter of my diary that Barbara Cardell has been responsible for my most thrilling recent moments; not long ago *she* breathed in my ear: "If you don't let me alone I'll kill you."

Tom, my own younger brother, owes me packets of money, and he is white with indignation this afternoon because I have been telling people so, and there is a girl here whom he wanted to impress. And there is Mrs. Hartley Case, who has a weakness for unpleasant men. A curious woman and, I am afraid, a spiteful one.

The question will be asked why I should write this statement. The fact is, I don't want things to go to the point of hanging, and I would rather feel that I had been delightfully clever. This confession will therefore be discovered in just the right time, and he or she will be saved from the gallows by the very man they despised.

The difficulty is what to do with these pages when I have cut them out. Before now, rather than carry valuable documents about with me, I have posted them to myself; but if I posted these they would be opened too soon after my death; the same would apply if I addressed the letter to one of my guests or to the police, and so I have decided

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on an ingenious idea. I will entrust them to the postal authorities for some time by addressing the envelope to an imaginary person at an imaginary address; in due course the envelope will be scrawled across and returned to the Dead Letter Office, where it will be opened prior to its return to me; and this will occur, I calculate, in anything from three days to three weeks—certainly before a hanging could take place.

The next question, naturally, is the cause of death.

I must rule out any method usually employed in suicide, and this precludes drowning, gas, hanging, and poison. I must aim at sudden death, and the poison used by a murderer is generally gradual and most unpleasant.

This practically limits me to shooting.

I have a revolver, but there are two objections to the use of it.

The first is the fact that self-shooting is self-evident by the nature of the bullet-hole, and the second is the difficulty of disposing of the revolver.

So, I must create evidence of a struggle, or I must be shot in the back.

Can a man shoot himself in the back?

Experiments have satisfied me that it is none too easy to shoot oneself in the back of the head, but not too difficult to do so in the back of the body. On the other hand, a shot in the small of the back is not necessarily fatal or instantaneous, so I must make sure that the bullet goes slap through my heart. Having achieved this end, how am I to release my fingers from the revolver, and erase the finger-prints? I could guard against the latter problem by wearing gloves, but I can't help feeling that I should look rather silly lying dead in gloves. And, in any case, how am I to dispose of the revolver?

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I have turned this over in my mind innumerable times, and have hit upon and discarded all kinds of schemes. I have thought of fixing the revolver into some kind of niche or grip, and operating it by a string, but the revolver would remain where it was and would be easily spotted.

Then I thought of shooting myself alongside a bucket of whitewash in the hope that as my finger pulled the trigger and my hand relaxed its grip the revolver would drop into the bucket and would not be found for some days. You would be surprised at the curious ways in which one's mind works on a problem of this sort, and the far-fetched ideas that have struck me. You see, I want to hide the revolver merely for a day or two. Eventually, it must, of course, be found, wherever it is, but in the meantime I shall at least have entertained the guests. I cannot outline here all the ways and means I have examined, and, in any case, one of my headaches is coming on, and so I must be quick. I should hate to think that I were to be found after all this preparation, lying on the carpet with this unfinished statement on my table, and the pen beside it. But I have arrived at this conclusion, and though it sounds at first rather like the contraption of a caricaturist, I must devise some kind of pulley or strong spring which, as my hand slackens its grip before becoming rigid, will jerk the revolver out of my fingers, flinging it somewhere else.

If I can devise some kind of strong, elastic band, or coil spring, and fit the revolver to one end of it, I could stretch this to the uttermost at the moment of firing, certain that as the tension of my hand relaxed the revolver would be jerked away. I have felt so confident that this idea must not be lightly dismissed that I have been looking about in the workshops and garage for a spare spring, or something that would serve the purpose. The next problem is, to what

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is the *other* end of this spring or pulley to be attached, so that it will not be seen too easily? If I shot myself in the open I could arrange for the revolver to be flung by it over a hedge or a wall, or even up into a tree, but I am beginning to feel that it will be safest to have it dragged out of my hand into some *recess*. The most sensible place seems to me to be the loft in the workshops, I can attach one end of a spring to a ring in a rafter just out of sight, lengthen this with a piece of cord, and so arrange my position that the revolver will be shot up into the loft and left there, the moment I fall. In fact, this plan so pleases me that I am sure I shall find some way of working it out when I get there. In any case those who read this letter will judge whether I have been successful in getting rid of the gun, and I hope I shall give them a run for their money. If only I could devise a sort of nightmare catapult, I could have the revolver sent a tremendous distance, and my only regret then would be that I should never be able to see it travelling.

This, then, is my farewell, and I go without remorse.

I am not unamused at the belief that the disclosures in this letter will embarrass one or two of those mentioned. I dare say I shall be found with a twisted smile on my lips and my eyes turned towards the revolver's hiding place, though they won't realize that my expression is their one important clue. At any rate, no one can say my brain was affected; nobody, surely, ever planned an entertainment so meticulously as the perfect host. The only possibilities of error which I foresee are the failure of the revolver to hide itself, and the remote chance that this letter may be delivered to an empty house and left to lie there indefinitely.

STEPHEN P. H. MORETON.

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"I wish", said Pamela Viner to her husband, "somebody would very sweetly tell me what persuaded us to come here."

"The fact", replied her husband, "that like everybody else we are sorry for his sisters. And the only thing is to put up with him and to pretend he isn't here."

"You might as well try to pretend you hadn't seen a ghost sit down in a vacant place at dinner. Stephen is the official spectre at any feast he sits at. He's one of those men you never see till you're on top of him and then he always makes you jump. Perhaps you men don't notice the way he has of trying to make nice women hate him by the way he looks at them out of the corner of his eye."

"One day", said Billy, "someone will fill up his eye for him, and it may yet be me."

He paused and felt for his cigarette case.

"Come up to the house. They're slow bringing out the drinks, and that's one thing you ought at least to get plenty of at this place."

It was precisely twenty minutes after the Viners had gone in that everybody heard a sudden echoing report which was at first put down as a car backfiring. After a moment somebody did add:

"Or it may be Hugh Macfarlane after his blessed rabbits. In which case he must have hit one for the first time; he didn't let it have both barrels."

The guests continued, after that, to lounge about and to toy with cocktails, conversation being slow and a little forced, for when people are bored they are inclined to attempt ambiguous and pseudo-clever answers to the most ordinary questions; anything to create a little laughter.

It was dark, and one or two were settling down to bridge or billiards when the Moretons' chauffeur, coming back

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to duty and going towards the garage, stopped at the workshop for some tools, and switched on the light. There he remained with a stare, at first startled, then morbidly fascinated. Slowly he advanced across the uncovered flooring and halted, with stooping shoulders and limp arms, peering down at closer quarters until, against his inclination, he forced himself to reach down and touch that sprawling body; he had an unpleasant feeling that if it moved or emitted a sound of any sort he would catch at his breath and fall over backwards.

But it didn't move, and it made no sound. He tried to turn it over, and realized the significance of its dead weight; then his eyes became fascinated by the hole in Mr. Stephen's back and the blood-soaked area round it, and he looked down at his own fingers in distaste. Breathing heavily, he straightened and scuttled out of that building, and he ran all the way along the gravel to the house.

Some of them came running back; at least they started running, but as they neared the workshop it seemed as though, considering the man was dead, this showed some vague disrespect, and they dropped to a rapid and determined walk, pushed in one by one, and collected in the doorway, whilst Tom Moreton went weirdly ahead and dropped upon one knee. From the back Billy Viner said: "We heard a shot, you know. This, then, is what it was . . . we thought it was a car . . . or Hugh Macfarlane shooting rabbits."

And Arthur Bush, going ahead to stand by Tom, said, almost curtly, because he spoke in a curt way when disturbed:

"I suppose he didn't shoot himself?"

From the back Mrs. Hartley Case, who was very still and very white, replied:

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"He certainly never needed to do that. Anyone would have saved him the trouble."

"No man", said Billy Viner, "shoots himself in the back. He must have been doing something here, and somebody surprised him, and fired before he could turn."

"Stephen", said Mrs. Hartley Case, "had a flair, of course, for turning his back on people."

Tom, white and shaky, turned Stephen over; there *was* a twisted smile on his lips and his eyes *were* open.

"Better leave everything," said Tom. "See that my sisters don't come here. Will somebody go and telephone? We'll have to get the police and tell them to bring a doctor. Better keep everything as it is, or the place will be all over finger-prints."

The guests and the family had been collected in the big room on the ground floor. They were confronted by two plain-clothes representatives of the police, and an inspector and a constable in uniform. The constable kept dutifully in the background, staring at his superiors. The county superintendent was proceeding with his questions as if a murder were a necessary and important part of anybody's daily life, and must be briskly faced.

There were no tears, Stephen's sisters had been inured by life with him, and they stood at the back, dry-eyed and old before their years, crushed and apologetic. They heard the police fix the time of the shot and catechize each guest as to his movements at that time; they checked these up as far as possible, and made little notes and now and then corrections.

Before the guests were allowed to disperse even for a short time, the police carried out a careful search of the house, workshop, and grounds. They were looking for a revolver. In the workshop they also looked for other

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clues, but found nothing to intrigue them, and the body was removed after photographs had been taken; then they locked the workshop. In the dark they examined the paths, but the gravel had by now been generally kicked about, and the superintendent had to resign himself in the end to the probability that this would be a lengthy business. There were a rain water-butt, a smouldering bonfire, bushes, and ditches to be searched with every care. This would go on all night and all to-morrow.

The guests sat up late, talking. In general they could say little, but in private they said a lot; and they supposed the police would get somebody in the end. Murder always came out, and they expected it would turn out to be one of them, but which? The more inquisitive kept looking for guilty expressions on the faces of the others, but people have very different ways of showing or concealing their emotions. To one extent they were unanimous, and so were the police. He obviously hadn't killed himself. This was a triumph of the first order for the ingenuity of Stephen Moreton, and one can imagine him still grinning where he lay.

Next day the police dragged the pond, and Stephen's revolver was found at the bottom of it.

* * * *

That day the police held another little court. The revolver, for everyone to see, lay upon the table.

Did anyone identify it?

Tom Moreton identified it. It was Stephen's own revolver. So far as Tom knew it had never been out of Stephen's keeping. Why had Stephen carried a revolver? Was it licensed? No, Tom believed it wasn't licensed. So far as he knew Stephen preferred to carry it unofficially and risk the consequences; he carried it, Tom supposed, because he had made many enemies.

Were any of his enemies among this party?

Tom shrugged. He imagined they were everywhere. The superintendent pointed out two interesting facts. The revolver was Stephen's own, only one bullet had been fired from it, and that had proved to be the bullet which had been extracted from the body and compared with the rifling and the calibre of the revolver. The police began to take a grimmer interest; there was rubbing of chins and scratching of hard heads. They intended to find out, come what might, who had known that there was that revolver in the house. This was their great mistake and Stephen's great success. They should have tried to find out how Stephen could have died by his own hand in the workshop, and yet transferred the revolver to the duckpond.

Days passed and they were no nearer a solution. The guests went to their homes. The space given to the mystery in the papers grew noticeably less; soon a mere paragraph reminded readers that the police were pursuing their inquiries. Scotland Yard had been called in, so far without result. The guests met one another sometimes at lunch or tea and talked the whole thing over. They even telephoned when they heard rumours, but these were always only rumours.

And then the great day for Stephen dawned, and a clerk in the Dead Letter Office at the G.P.O. arrived, in the course of routine, at what appeared to be an ordinary letter, "incorrectly addressed" to a person "not known". He opened the letter to note the name and address of the sender, and found the last few pages neatly cut out of Stephen's journal. He then beheld the cautionary lines that Stephen had written first; so he rose from his desk, and went to bend over another clerk's desk, where they read the script together, after which the first clerk solemnly proceeded down the room and took it to his chief.

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Eventually that document reached the police, they studied it with incredulous comprehension, and then they looked at one another, and they said:

"Did you see any spring or pulley in the rafters—and besides, how did he fling it into the *pond*—thirty or forty yards away? Look here, we'd better go down there again and check this up——"

And a fast car was ordered.

Two of the guests at the week-end party met later in the week. These were Hugh Macfarlane and Billy Viner, and it was Hugh who called on Viner.

He said: "Have you seen the early evening papers, Viner? There's an extraordinary headline and a letter published—parts of it at any rate—supposed to have been written by Stephen."

"Yes," Viner said, "I've seen it, and I read the letter."

"It's a confession—unless they've cut out bits that alter the whole sense of it."

"Oh, yes, it's a confession, and it's typical of Stephen. The only thing nobody can explain is how he got the revolver flung so far away, and what he did it *with*."

Hugh had been walking restlessly about the room; he stopped now with feet apart and hands on hips, looking at Viner seriously.

"Well, he took pains enough to make it fool-proof. The only error he foresaw was that the letter might not be opened in time—that and the doubts he had about getting rid of the revolver. But he was all right there. The gun disappeared all right and the letter turned up at the proper time. Do you know what he entirely overlooked, though?"

Viner shook his head. He was eyeing Macfarlane curiously. He thought Macfarlane looked rather strained.

"There's something I want to tell you, Viner. I'd like

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to tell somebody and you're a chap I can trust. I was the last chap to see Stephen alive. I know more than I told them."

"I dare say we all do."

"But this is vital—and I've got to tell someone now. I don't know whether you know it, but I'm in love with Barbara Cardell."

Viner looked at him quizzically. "You surprise me."

"I am, Viner—I have been for ages. And because of what she told me *I'd* gone that day to try to find Stephen and have it out with him. I was going through the garden in a hell of a temper when I noticed him go into the workshop, and as he didn't come out I followed him and stood in the doorway and looked in. I realize now that he was fiddling with a cord, and in fact a spring was left on the bench and could be seen there afterwards, though nobody thought anything of it. I couldn't see what he was doing then, and so I just said:

" 'Stephen——'

"He didn't look round. He simply answered in that beastly voice of his:

" 'Please go away, I'm busy.'

"But I said 'Stephen' again, a bit more impatiently, and then I snapped, 'I want to talk to you about Barbara Cardell,' and at that he said, in the sort of mutter of anyone who's very busy doing something:

" 'I can't imagine anybody having much to say about that young woman.'

"As he said that, Viner, I saw something lying on a table. It was his revolver, and something induced me to pick it up. I was going to show I meant business, and so I held it with a distinct satisfaction at the idea of it pointing at him, and said:

" 'You'd better turn round, Stephen.'

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"And then he seemed to think that over and suddenly he gave an uncanny gurgle, like a man going a little mad, but he lifted his head a little and seemed to stare in front of him, and then he said:

" 'Good Lord, have you picked up my revolver?'

"I didn't answer, and he went on: 'Now, that's the one possibility I never thought of. . . . *never*. In that case, *by all means shoot*. Shoot now. Right in the back, but for your own sake and mine do shoot to kill. I don't want to be winged or lamed and left here for you to have another shot at . . . and don't ever say after this that I had no sense of humour.'

"I waited. I *couldn't* shoot, and when he realized I was dithering and wanting him to look at me, he suddenly snapped out: 'Go on, for pity's sake, get on with it. You never keep men waiting on the gallows! Try to remember, man alive, what you've come here for. You've come about a girl . . . if you don't shoot I'll have to tell you some of the things I did to her. You don't want me to *drive* you to it, do you? Or do you? Good Heavens, I'll tell you some things about her if you like!' And he did, Viner, all sorts of terrible things."

Hugh stopped and came close to Viner.

"I know now what he was doing. . . . It *wasn't the truth* . . . he was telling me all that to drive me to it; he wanted me to fit in with the whole scheme like the last part of a jig-saw puzzle . . . and so *he drove me to it*. He stood there, with his back to me, and kept on talking—getting more scandalous all the time—and suddenly something snapped in me, and I fired, all in a second. I did fire—and now I realize I hit him just where he wanted to be hit. . . . And he crumpled up and gurgled once, then dropped and lay there, and I stayed just long enough to make sure he

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was dead, then I got out of it, and I got rid of the revolver. And when they were cross-examining me afterwards I told the police I was with Barbara at that time and she said that was so."

Viner was at his sideboard pouring out stiff whiskies, and now he turned and he grimly handed one to Hugh.

"Better drink this, and pull yourself together. You've told somebody now and you'll feel better. But remember this much. Never in your life get tight. When men get tight they talk. This will die down and be forgotten; you'll be as right as rain, as long as you can keep from talking. You had the great satisfaction of shooting a man who deserved it, and you're going to get away with it—by kind permission of the man you shot."

He nodded and he motioned to the glass.

"Go on—drink that—and then forget it."

BY

W. COOPER-WILLSON



THE STREET ACCIDENT

“Did you see in the paper about that Spelkin man, Mr. Buxton? I think it’s a shame.”

Miss Minchin neatly inserted a sheet of the Trust’s expensive stationery into her typewriter, glanced at her shorthand notes and, with the uncanny skill of the expert talked on as she typed: “Dragging up a murder after all these years. I mean, it isn’t fair!”

“Why not?” asked Mr. Buxton. “Two thousand and forty-three, sixteen, fourpence.” He inserted the total at the foot of the ledger column he was casting and, as efficient as Miss Minchin, started on another column as he continued: “He strangled his wife apparently, and he’s managed to go free for twenty years. What’s he got to grumble at?”

“Oh, you’re so hard!” Miss Minchin tossed her head. “I don’t believe you’ve got any feelings at all. From all the papers say about her, you’d have strangled her yourself if she’d been your wife. I know I should—wasting all his money and carrying on with another man into the bargain. She didn’t deserve to have a husband!”

Miss Minchin had reason for deep feeling on the subject

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for although, as secretary to the chairman of the Trust, she had achieved a comfortable salary and the dignity of a room shared only with Mr. Buxton, the accountant, she still, at thirty-five, hankered after the married state and envied those women fortunate enough to possess husbands.

So much so that she had even considered the possibility of Mr. Buxton as a mate for herself, though her endeavours to find some point of contact with him had met with little encouragement. Still, dry, precise, parchment-faced like his own ledgers as he was, he must surely be human somewhere.

"Don't you think", she persevered, "that a man like that, who's done all sorts of good work since, ought to have it counted in his favour? I mean, it isn't as though he was a sort of Jack-the-Ripper, making a habit of it. What good is it going to do to hang him?"

She finished her letter and inserted a fresh sheet. And just when it seemed that once more she had failed—that Mr. Buxton either had not bothered to listen to her or had not thought her remark worth answering—he spoke:

"There may be something in that. There does seem a difference——"

He broke off. The telephone was ringing and he lifted the receiver. Miss Minchin was so annoyed that she viciously perforated the paper with a full stop. The thing *would* ring just then—when, for the first time in three years, Mr. Buxton appeared to be about to agree with her.

"Yes. . . . Buxton speaking. . . . Oh yes; certainly. . . . Yes, at once."

Mr. Buxton gave a hasty glance at the office clock—two minutes to three—then rose and hurried out through the door to the next room. A moment later she heard his footsteps on the stairs.

"Bother!" said Miss Minchin. "I might have got him to take me out to lunch to-morrow."

With a sigh of resignation she was starting on a fresh paragraph when a loud shout and the screech of brakes came to her ears from the street below.

"Whatever's that?" She stood up and stepped over to the window. Below her the traffic was at a standstill. A crowd was gathering about a figure which lay huddled in the road. Miss Minchin peered out—then gave a little shriek and darted towards the door. . . .

Dr. Anthony Merlin was stuck in a traffic block in Lothario Street. Normally, he regarded this route as a short cut from Harley Street to St. Christopher's Hospital, but to-day:

"Damn it all," he muttered, "I wish I'd gone down by Oxford Street. It may be slow, but you do get there sometime. Hullo! We're moving!"

The lorry in front of him gave a hopeful jerk and he slipped into gear, just as a huge red bus, the leading vehicle of the stream coming in the other direction, charged down with steaming radiator. . . .

From a big office building on the right hurried a middle-aged man, hatless, his fingers fumblingly adjusting the spectacles on his nose. He looked towards the gap between Dr. Merlin's car and the lorry, glanced vaguely to the right, and then stepped straight in front of the bus.

There was a screech and a shout, and time and the traffic stood still.

"Better see if I can do anything, I suppose," Dr. Merlin muttered, pulling his car into the kerb and getting out. As he crossed the road a crowd was already gathering, and he had some difficulty in forcing his way through to the centre, where a policeman was already bending over the victim.

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"D'you want a doctor, constable?" he asked.

The policeman looked up at him. "You a doctor, sir? You might have a look, but I'm afraid he's a goner. Walked straight in front of it. I never saw anything like it." He shook his head at human folly.

"Yes, I saw it." Dr. Merlin made a hurried examination, but could only agree with the constable, that life was extinct. He stood up, to find the bus driver, palpably shaken, at his elbow:

"Spoiled my record that has. Never gave me a chance. He was under the wheel before I saw him. . . ."

"You couldn't help it." Merlin patted the man's arm sympathetically. The kindly tone of voice of the tall doctor, the friendly smile of understanding in his eyes, seemed to steady the man.

"Thanks, sir," he said. "If you'd be a witness?"

He climbed back into his seat, while the policeman turned as a hand plucked at his sleeve.

"You know him, miss?"

Miss Minchin was beginning to wish she had not looked out of the window. The dreadful conviction had come over her that not only had she had no affection for Mr. Buxton in life, but that in death he made her feel ill; but she looked the other way and did her duty.

"Yes, it's Mr. Buxton—Mr. James Buxton. I was only just talking to him in the office a minute ago. Then I happened to look out of the window and saw it. Rowbridge Financial Trust will find me—we were both employed there. . . ."

Dr. Anthony Merlin saw he could do nothing useful, gave his card to the policeman, and was turning away when he saw the dead man's spectacles lying in the gutter. A craning busybody was on the point of stepping on them.

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It seemed a pity, though of course they could be of no use now; but no one is logical all the time.

Absently, Dr. Merlin picked them up and pocketed them for safety.

It was, of course, a tragedy; but a doctor, if he is to be any use, has to case-harden himself to some extent against other people's tragedies. A week had passed, and the sudden death of Mr. James Buxton had almost faded from Dr. Anthony Merlin's mind when he met Inspector Pape of the C.I.D. and was requested to recall its details.

It had often pleased Dr. Merlin, in his spare moments, to exercise his brains in the solution of a baffling crime. So successful had he been on more than one occasion that the police force, usually as resentful of amateur interference as the medical profession itself, had taken him to its heart; and so it came about that Inspector Pape, a big fair-haired man, with a rather boyish face, had had previous acquaintance with Dr. Merlin, for the latter's shrewd insight had been of practical and profitable help to the Scotland Yard man, while Dr. Merlin himself was always intrigued by a mystery.

"But surely, Pape," chaffed Merlin, "a common street accident is beneath the notice of a Detective Inspector? A few homely words from the coroner about speeding or jay-walking, as the case may be, and the matter is disposed of!"

"That's more or less true, as a rule." Pape appeared undecided as to how much he should say. He hesitated, then went on: "Where it's a clear case of accident. . . ."

"What bee's in your bonnet now? Come on, man, let's have the story!"

"Well, as it's you, Dr. Merlin. But you understand, it's quite confidential. The question is, Was it an accident or did he commit suicide?"

THE STREET ACCIDENT

Dr. Merlin thought a minute: "Accident undoubtedly, I should say. I saw the whole thing. He came hustling out of his office, barely paused on the kerb, and stepped right in front of the bus. There was a determined purposeful air about him—no, don't say he was determined to kill himself; he didn't give me that impression. I should say quite definitely that he had determined to cross the road, not the Styx."

"Your opinion would be good enough for me, sir, but for other facts. As you've guessed, I was not called in to investigate a street accident. The fact is, there appears little doubt that the man had been embezzling on a large scale and was on the verge of being discovered. The frauds were reported to us at the Yard, and I have been looking into the matter. . . ."

"He was in a corner, so he took the easiest way out; is that it?"

"Yes; the inquest has been adjourned, but I have little doubt that the coroner will bring in a verdict of *felo-de-se*. Buxton worked for Sir Charles Rowbridge—the Rowbridge Financial Trust, you know—big people, eminently respectable, sound and above board. Buxton seems to have shaken them to the core, and I believe their shares are in danger of a slump if this comes out—undermine the confidence of the public. . . ."

"What sort of fellow was Buxton?"

"According to Sir Charles, he was the old, trusted retainer who has broken his master's heart—been with the firm upwards of ten years, never any complaint. Now this dreadful thing and so on. But the typist girl—Miss Minchin—says she'd never have trusted him any further than she could see him. One of these secretive, poker-faced johnnies, according to her. She doesn't think he committed suicide

either—reckons he was much more the type to have a good get-away ready for himself. Besides, according to her, there was no question of premeditation; they were having a nice cosy chat about the Canterbury murderer.

...

“Spelkin?”

“Yes. Can’t help feeling sorry for him, by the way.”

“Nor can I. Rotten to have a thing dragged up after all these years—almost like a ghost from some previous incarnation. Seems a waste of a good man too. . . . Sorry I interrupted.”

“She apparently shared your view, but Buxton stuck up for the letter of the law—rather ironical that—anyhow the phone went suddenly, Buxton took a message, and popped out.”

“That hardly suggests suicide, does it? And I must say it looked much more to me as if he never properly saw the bus at all—thought the road was clear and quite misjudged the speed of the traffic. Sorry I can’t help you. . . .”

Dr. Anthony Merlin saw headlines in his evening paper: “BUXTON CASE. VERDICT OF FELO-DE-SE. ROW-BRIDGE TRUST SHARES FALL.”

The next morning there was rather more, with the statement that the shares had rallied following the chairman’s announcement that he proposed to reimburse the Trust out of his own pocket.

“Fine man, Sir Charles,” said Dr. Merlin to himself. “Quite the best type of financier. He’d regard it as his personal responsibility to the public for appointing a man like that. Few like him, more’s the pity!”

But somehow Dr. Anthony Merlin could not quite shake off the mental picture of Mr. James Buxton stepping out so hurriedly, so confidently, in such a business-like way

THE STREET ACCIDENT

into Lothario Street. He could see him now, on the kerb, fiddling with his glasses before he took the plunge.

Dr. Merlin shook his head—psychologically it was all wrong. And yet—anyone with eyes in his head ought to have seen that bus. Really, the fellow must have been blind. . . .

Merlin scratched his head. There was some of Buxton's property on his desk. He came to a sudden decision and rang up Inspector Pape:

"Look here, Pape; will you find out one or two things for me? In connection with that Buxton case. . . ."

"But that's all settled! Bloke killed himself and Sir Charles has compensated the Trust."

"Yes, I know. But just to satisfy my curiosity, find out where he kept his glasses when he wasn't using them—the ones he was putting on when he came out into the street, and, if you can, find out who tested his eyes for him."

"You think there was something wrong with his eyesight?"

"Perhaps. One more thing—can you find out who rang him up?"

Inspector Pape certainly thought that Dr. Merlin was flogging a dead horse; but he had a great respect for the physician's acumen, and, much as he doubted their usefulness, he went personally into the questions which agitated Dr. Merlin's mind, and went into them thoroughly.

When at length he ran down the telephone call, he called on Dr. Merlin with a puzzled face.

"Look here, you're keeping something back. I've traced that phone call and . . ."

"Somebody else is keeping something back, eh?"

W. COOPER-WILLSON

"Yes. I let you know about the glasses. What's it all about?"

"First. Do you know what astigmatism is?"

"Vaguely."

"At least you know that for long and short sight, people wear magnifying and diminishing glasses, which are spherical—that is, they bulge like a slice cut off a sphere."

Pape nodded.

"Well, when a person has astigmatism, he is long or short sighted only in one diameter—that is to say, a horizontal object may be in focus while a vertical one is completely blurred. So he wears glasses which are not spherical, but cylindrical—curved in one direction only. Do you get me?"

"I follow."

"Then you follow that the direction of the cylinder—the question whether it is horizontal or vertical—is all important?"

"Obviously, in that case."

"And if his lenses were rotated in their frames, his glasses would be worse than useless?"

Inspector Pape began to see the drift of this lecture on optics.

"But—you haven't got hold of Buxton's specs, have you?"

"Yes. I picked them up at the time of the accident and forgot all about them. But yesterday I had a chat with Buxton's oculist and saw his prescription. I compared the spectacles."

"And?"

"Both lenses have been rotated through a right-angle. It's quite easy to do. Just loosen the little screw at the side of the frames with the point of a penknife. These screws have been scratched—fairly recently."

THE STREET ACCIDENT

Inspector Pape opened his eyes—very wide. He saw the rest.

“And then he was called out in a hurry by—by someone who knew where he kept his glasses and that he always put them on just as he reached the street—by someone who took the chance of his stepping under a bus or a lorry. . . .”

“That’s it,” said Dr. Anthony Merlin. “But how are you going to prove it?”

Inspector Pape looked glum. “I don’t know. Frankly I don’t know what to do, and I half wish you hadn’t told me. But it can’t rest there now.”

Sir Charles Rowbridge’s private office was a model of fastidious comfort, carried out in thick pile and soft leather. He waved his visitors to chairs and offered cigars, after introductions had been made:

“Inspector Pape—Dr. Anthony Merlin—Mr. Goodbody, of Messrs. Thring, Thring and Goodbody, our auditors, as you know. . . . I understand there is still some question about poor Buxton’s death?”

“I had to come and see you, Sir Charles.” Inspector Pape was rather diffident. Sir Charles Rowbridge was an important man, and Pape’s task was difficult. Bungling it might easily lose him his position in the force.

Sir Charles smiled encouragement. About fifty years of age, Napoleonic of brow, with black hair hardly tinged with grey, he had the royal facility of putting his guests at their ease.

“Just tell me what your difficulty is. If I can help you you may be sure I will. I understood you wished Mr. Goodbody to be present? That was so, was it not?”

“Yes sir. It is really his opinion that I want; but I thought it better for you to be here too. Since Mr. Buxton’s death certain facts have come to light which raise the

question of whether the embezzlement was not the work of some other person. Whether, in fact, the guilt has not been fastened on him in order to protect somebody else."

Sir Charles was looking very thoughtful:

"I'm afraid you're wrong there, inspector."

"Quite out of the question!" Mr. Goodbody was emphatic. "I don't know, of course, on what information you are acting, inspector, but I can say, now that I have been through all the books, that there is no doubt—not a vestige of doubt—that Buxton himself perpetrated these frauds."

Inspector Pape bit his lower lip. Things were not quite going according to plan.

"That is your considered opinion, Mr. Goodbody? It rather upsets my case, and I should like you to be absolutely definite."

"There's absolutely no question about it!"

"In that case, I do not think I need trouble you further. I would just like a word with Sir Charles, to explain myself. . . ."

Mr. Goodbody rose and took a rather frigid departure. It was evident that he considered his time had been frivolously wasted. He almost slammed the door after him.

Inspector Pape resumed his seat. He had made his decision.

"Now, Sir Charles," he asked, his career hanging on every word, only his faith in Dr. Merlin supporting him, "please tell me why, if Buxton really committed these frauds himself, he was killed?"

Dr. Anthony Merlin nodded his appreciation of the inspector's pluck, and waited with intense curiosity for the reply. Sir Charles' expression remained entirely unperturbed as he asked:

"And your reason for such a strange question, inspector?"

THE STREET ACCIDENT

"On the morning he was killed," Inspector Pape said quietly, "James Buxton had left his distance glasses in your room—you were there when he returned after lunch and called him in. Before leaving the office, he went into your room to get them. Without them, he was practically blind to everything more than yard or two away. At the time of his death those glasses had been so altered as to make them worse than useless. You left the office ten minutes before he did, went to a call-box, and two or three minutes before three o'clock—when the banks shut—rang him up with peremptory instructions to go to the bank—knowing that he would have to hurry to get there in time. I should like your explanation."

"Do you propose to charge me with any crime? If so, is it not usual to caution. . . ."

"Frankly, Sir Charles, I have not enough evidence to take to any court—yet. I do not propose to charge you—at present; and if you can explain my information away, I should be extremely glad."

Sir Charles Rowbridge's hand was as steady as a rock as he lit himself a fresh cigar.

"I'm glad you came straight to me, even though you do seem to have lit on a mare's nest. I can quite well see the chain of reasoning in your mind, and. . . ."

"Admirable! That's the attitude to take up!" thought Dr. Anthony Merlin.

". . . material evidence for your fairy story is of course non-existent. I certainly rang Buxton up—but why on earth shouldn't I? I wanted him to go to the bank. If there had been any point in mentioning it, I should have done so. As regards his glasses, I certainly knew that he could not see far without them; apart from that. . . ."

Sir Charles paused to strike a match.

W. COOPER-WILSON

"Not quite as calm as he'd wish", thought Dr. Merlin, "or his cigar would not have gone out."

"So I think", continued Sir Charles, waving his hand in final disposition, "that we may consider that matter settled."

He half rose from his chair; then, apparently on a sudden impulse, sat down again, while his face broke into a smile:

"You know", he said in friendly fashion, as one man of the world to another, "it is curious you should have stumbled on to a story like that, for something similar really happened to a friend of mine. He had an unendurable acquaintance and an accident happened to him. I should like to tell you the story if you have time?"

"This is what I've come for," said Dr. Merlin to himself. Aloud he merely murmured: "No hurry at all, Sir Charles, as far as I'm concerned. I should like to hear it. You're not in a hurry, Pape?"

"I should very much like to hear it." Inspector Pape was courteous, but not friendly.

Sir Charles Rowbridge settled himself in his chair, crossed his legs, and got his cigar going to his satisfaction. At last, in a quiet, conversational tone, he started his story.

"My friend, we'll call him Rushton, happened to be a friend of Spelkin's."

"The Canterbury murderer?" Inspector Pape's professional interest was aroused. Anything concerning Spelkin was meat and drink to him. The crime had grown rusty with age. It badly needed the embellishment of a story which might make it a matter of flesh and blood rather than of dusty archives. Pape listened as attentively as Dr. Merlin now.

"Yes, the Canterbury murderer. Spelkin, as you know, strangled his wife, who was a perfectly dreadful woman.

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She made life entirely unendurable for him. He could get no redress. For various reasons he could not leave her. She was ruining his career, his reputation and his health. He stuck it for a long time; but in the end he could endure it no longer, and he took the law into his own hands.

"He successfully concealed the crime and the body for twenty years, during which time he achieved a prominent position. He became an authority on transport. When the War came, he was largely responsible for the Expeditionary Force getting to France without the loss of a single man or a single secret. He did many other things, and all the time so modestly that his name was hardly known to the public. He put his country greatly in his debt and refused all honours and publicity. At the end of twenty years an anonymous letter . . ."

"How do you know that?" asked Pape, for the source of the police inquiries had been kept a closely guarded secret.

"From my friend—er—Rushton. Rushton knew what Spelkin had done. He was an accessory after the fact. In view of his friendship and his estimate of Spelkin's real worth and the woman's worthlessness, he kept his knowledge to himself and considered himself justified. For some time all went well. Then the Serpent came to Eden."

"Someone else knew?" Dr. Merlin's elbow was on the arm of his chair and his chin was in his hand.

"A blackguardly, blackmailing hound called—shall we say Boreham?—fastened his tentacles into Rushton. How he had discovered the truth, who shall say, but he certainly knew the facts. To Rushton he became the Old Man of the Sea. Rushton was compelled to trust him with confidential employment, to pay him large sums of money, and to endure the constant sight of this parasite for his friend's sake."

"And then?" Inspector Pape was eagerly interested.

"Like all blackmailers, Boreham was never satisfied. Secure, as he thought, he began embezzling the funds of the firm. Rushton discovered this. It was bound to come out—Rushton could cover the matter once perhaps, but what guarantee was there that Boreham would not renew his depredations? Rushton announced his intention of denouncing Boreham and letting him do his worst. And Boreham called his bluff."

Sir Charles paused; his cigar had again gone out. He choose a new one, cut and lit it thoughtfully. His hearers concealed their impatience. At last he continued:

"Boreham played the Ace of Trumps. He sent an anonymous letter to the police denouncing Spelkin, making it plain that if Rushton opposed him, he in turn would be denounced. He was a filthy brute!"

"All blackmailers are. What did you—did Rushton do?" asked Dr. Anthony Merlin.

Sir Charles shrugged his shoulders:

"Boreham had played the Ace of Trumps. There was only one possible card for Rushton—the Joker! Boreham met with an accident. He was killed."

Sir Charles paused. There was no comment. He went on:

"You see, Rushton could not invoke the aid of the law. If he were exposed, it meant the collapse of a great undertaking and the impoverishment of thousands who had trusted him. At the same time, he felt that he had been morally right in all he did."

"After this apologia", thought Dr. Anthony Merlin, "all that remains is to make a graceful exit." He rose; Pape did the same.

"Well, Inspector?"

THE STREET ACCIDENT

"I am sorry to have taken up so much of your time, sir. Good day!"

"Good day! Dr. Merlin, must you go?"

Dr. Merlin held out his hand. "Thank you for your story, sir; it has been most instructive."

He followed the inspector out into the rush and bustle of the street.

"Well?" asked Merlin.

"It's the devil, isn't it? He's quite right when he says I haven't enough facts to act on. But I shall have to go on looking till I find them—much as I hate doing so. The only concrete evidence we have at present is those spectacles. You'd better let me have them by the way. Have you got them on you?"

"D'you know?" said Dr. Anthony Merlin, "I've done a damn silly thing. I left them on Sir Charles's table."

Damn, silly &

*if you want to see me/
name & please see on
Page 17.*

Rabert H. V. W.
now early
BY
W. ENGLISH
★ *V. Hood*

THE CRIME AT BODDEN'S BRIDGE

The telephone bell suddenly broke the early morning silence, and Inspector Saunders picked up the receiver.

"Hello!" he called, sliding a pencil and a writing-pad into position on his table.

"Is that the police station?" came a shaky voice from the other end of the line.

"Yes, Inspector Saunders speaking. Who's that?"

"I'm speaking from the box in Moss Lane, near Bodden's Walk," was the reply. It was a man's voice, the inspector decided, although a weak and probably a youthful one.

The words came jerkily, mingled with sounds of laboured breathing, and there was panic in the tones as the speaker added:

"For Gawd's sake, send somebody round quick!"

"What's happened?" asked the inspector, as the other paused.

"I—I dunno for certain—but it's either suicide or—or murder."

"Where?"

"Just near 'ere, on th' river bank by Bodden's Bridge. Oh, my Gawd, what a sight it wor—what a sight!"

THE CRIME AT BODDEN'S BRIDGE

"You've seen the body?" prompted the inspector, as the speaker paused again.

The only reply he got was a groan.

"Come now," said the inspector, sternly, "pull yourself together, and tell me as plainly as you can all about it. Who are you and what have you seen?"

"Well, I—I was going along Bodden's Walk only a few minutes sin'," the speaker began, still breathing heavily and speaking with an effort, "an' when I come to th' river bank I started to climb up it."

There was silence again.

"Go on, what else?" asked the inspector.

"I—I 'adn't got more'n 'alf way up," went on the other, "when—when I saw summat sticking out o' th' grass at th' top o' th' bank. It wor—it wor——"

"Yes, yes," said the inspector, impatiently; "it was what?"

"A face!" came the tremulous reply. "An 'orrible, white, dead face, staring and grinning at me. It wor awful, awful! Oh—oh!"

The speaker paused again, and all the inspector could hear was more heavy breathing. Then came other noises as though someone were shuffling about in the telephone box.

"Hello, hello!" he called, "are you there?"

There was no reply.

"Hello!" he called again. "Listen. I'll be round there in a few minutes; just stand by the telephone box."

He listened for an answer. It seemed to him as though someone were trying to speak, but all he could hear was a series of groans which grew fainter.

Suddenly several sharp cracking sounds in quick succession smote his ears, followed by a complete silence except for the hum of the wires.

"Hello, hello!" he called, straining his ears for any fur-

ther sounds. Hearing nothing, he pressed the receiver rest several times.

"Hello, Exchange! I say, what's happened at the other end? I can't get any answer."

He waited and presently the operator spoke:

"Sorry, there's no reply, and the receiver is off."

"I thought it was. Will you keep us connected, miss, in case he speaks again?"

Keeping the receiver to his ear, he glanced at the notes he had scribbled on the pad.

"Damn!" he muttered. "I didn't get the fellow's name, after all."

He pressed a button under the edge of the table, and almost immediately a constable came in.

"Oh, Barnes," he said, "go and tell Williams to bring the car round right away. Then telephone from the other phone to Dr. M'Crae and tell him I'll be round in two minutes to take him along to a case of either suicide or murder near Moss Lane.

"After that telephone for the ambulance and instruct them to proceed along Moss Lane as far as Bodden's Walk. I'll have somebody there to meet them."

"Very good, sir," said the constable, and strode out of the room.

The inspector had been speaking with his hand over the mouthpiece while still listening at the telephone, and he now called the exchange again.

"I suppose that receiver's still off?" he asked.

"Yes, it's still off," came the reply.

"H'm, it's queer. Well, put me through to Local, one, five, seven; but if anyone puts that receiver back, or speaks from that phone, let me know at once and put the speaker through to me."

THE CRIME AT BODDEN'S BRIDGE

He placed the receiver back and half a minute later the bell rang.

"Is that Mr. Johnson?" he called. "This is Saunders speaking, Johnson. Could you be ready in five minutes with your camera? Good. What's that? Light? No, it's an open air job; plenty of light. I'll be round to pick you up in a few minutes; tell you more when I see you."

A minute later Inspector Saunders was climbing into a black saloon car outside the police station, when P.C. Barnes came hurrying out.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "Hudson's on the phone. Wants to speak to you urgent, sir."

The inspector backed out of the car and re-entered the dingy building.

"Hello!" he called, and heard P.C. Hudson speaking.

"That you, Inspector?" he heard. "I've just had a message as there's been a woman's dead body found near Bodden's Bridge."

"Who told you?"

"Young lady, sir—Miss Jennie Hall. I was on point duty and she came along Moss Lane on her bike, jumped off, and came up to me. Said she'd just seen a young feller in a state of collapse near Bodden's Walk.

"When she asked him what was the matter he managed to say something about 'aving seen a dead body near Bodden's Bridge. I'm speaking from the butcher's shop at the cross roads, sir, and I'd like you to come on as soon as possible. I'm going on to the spot right now, sir."

"All right, Hudson, you go on. I'll be there in a few minutes. As a matter of fact, I've already heard about it. Chap told me over the phone—must have been the same fellow the young lady saw.

"Hurry on, Hudson, and keep a lookout for this young

fellow. Don't disturb anything when you get there, and keep any inquisitive folk well away."

It still wanted a few minutes to nine o'clock when the black saloon drew up at a telephone booth in Moss Lane. Except for the four men in the car the road was deserted. It was flanked on either side by hedges and fields.

The telephone booth had been placed at this lonely spot apparently to meet the requirements not only of the houses to be seen in one direction on the fringe of the town, but also of a group of dwellings farther along the road in the other direction.

Inspector Saunders glanced at his watch as he sprang from the car.

"Exactly twelve minutes since the fellow phoned me," he said.

He looked in the telephone booth, the door of which was half open, and noticed that the receiver was dangling by its cord. He peered about and stooped to examine the floor, while the others gathered round. Then he closed the door and turned to the chauffeur.

"Stay here, Williams," he said, "and don't allow anyone to go near that box. We may want to take some fingerprints."

"Very good, sir," replied Williams.

"What do ye want fingerprint impressions of your informant for?" asked the doctor. Dr. M'Crae and the inspector were old friends who often collaborated in the various police cases which occurred in the district. It was seldom that the cases were either big or baffling, but when they were the doctor, with true Scotch diligence, endeavoured to follow the inspector's reasonings and deductions.

"Because", the inspector now answered, "when I can't find my man I try to get his fingerprints."

THE CRIME AT BODDEN'S BRIDGE

"But the man will be with P.C. Hudson, won't he? You told me Hudson would be here before you."

"There is nothing to indicate that he is with Hudson," replied Inspector Saunders. "He may be there, and he may not, and until I know for certain that he is there I'm having those fingerprints guarded."

"Absolutely unnecessary," retorted the doctor, shooting a side glance at him and hoping the retort would result in the inspector revealing his reasons for thinking that the mysterious informer had disappeared.

But the inspector was not to be drawn.

"The best way to settle the argument", he said, "is to push on to the river where Hudson's waiting for us."

They turned off the road, followed by the photographer, on to a cinder footpath known as Bodden's Walk. It led through a flat, low-lying field towards the river, whose raised banks could be seen ahead.

It was a pleasant summer's morning, not yet too warm. There was a light breeze which brought to them the scents of the countryside, and the little photographer, panting somewhat as he struggled along behind the other two, a heavy box in one hand and the tripod on the opposite shoulder, began to wish that his mission was to photograph the scenes and sights around him—that clump of trees over there with the lace-like foliage, for example—instead of the Something which lay quiet and still somewhere just ahead.

As they neared the river they noticed that the path made a winding turn round the clump of trees, and these had obstructed their view of a portion of the bank. It was on this portion of the bank they first saw P.C. Hudson, standing immobile against the sky.

The path turned until it ran parallel with and alongside

the bank, which sloped upwards steeply at first, then more gradually, to a height of about 20 ft.

P.C. Hudson saluted solemnly and indicated by a movement of his hand and an inclination of his head that what they had come to see lay at his feet.

"Where's the fellow who found the body?" called Saunders.

P.C. Hudson shook his head.

"Dunno, sir," he replied. "I looked for him as I came along, but I ain't seen a soul."

"Wonder where he's got to," muttered the inspector.

"Never mind, you've got his fingerprints," said the doctor with a touch of sarcasm.

As the other did not reply he added: "Look here, Saunders, you knew all along he wouldn't be here, but it beats me how ye did know it."

The inspector answered, with studied patience, as one addressing a child.

"Well, there's one spot on the main road," he said, "from which you can see this part of the bank, and as we were coming along in the car I could see Hudson walking about on the top, and he was alone. Hullo, look there!"

They had reached a position on the path opposite the constable as Saunders pointed to a number of footprints in the clay which formed the side of the embankment.

"Recent ones, too," he added. "All the clay round about is hard and caked on the surface, while where these marks are it is quite moist."

He stepped on the clay near one of the impressions, then carefully compared the two. His own imprint seemed enormous beside the other, which was small and narrow, but both showed moisture oozing out of the clay.

THE CRIME AT BODDEN'S BRIDGE

"These seem to bear out the story of the fellow who phoned you," said the doctor.

Saunders nodded. "There's his highest step," he said. "Then he appears to have partly slipped down again."

He began climbing the embankment, about a yard to the left of the footprints. Before he was half-way up he stopped, and the two below saw him suddenly stiffen and sway slightly. He steadied himself, and when he turned to them they seemed to be looking into the face of a different man.

"My God!" he exclaimed, breathing heavily and keeping his face turned away from the top of the bank.

The doctor sprang up the side of the slope and when he was alongside Saunders he looked up.

From the path below they had been unable to see the ridge which formed the actual summit of the embankment, but having clambered up the steeper portion of the incline the doctor could now see that the ridge was covered with long grass which terminated abruptly where the side of the bank had apparently been cut away recently, leaving a barren vertical strip which formed a step about a foot high.

Protruding from the long grass and hanging over the edge was a human face.

The effect on Saunders and the doctor was intensified by the fact that from the position they were in the object appeared to be a face and head without a body. It was also an inverted face, with the chin jutting upwards, forming a motionless point on the skyline in contrast with the waving, restless stalks of grass.

But it was the expression on the face which had the greatest effect on the onlookers. The mouth was set in a half-open grin. The eyes were wide open, glazed and staring, and protruding until they appeared to be on the point

of bursting from their sockets. The skin was dark and discoloured in an irregular manner, and the short, tousled hair showed thick and black against the brown clay.

Dr. M'Crae was the first to speak.

"What a ghastly sight!" he said. "No wonder the fellow was excitable and nervous."

Saunders did not answer. He stood quite still halfway up the bank and stared abstractedly at the footprints. The doctor, tall, lean and agile, climbed easily and quickly to the top and knelt down by the prone figure there, the constable looming over him like a fore-shortened giant.

The inspector, a much heavier man than the doctor, followed slowly and called to Johnson to bring his camera up. The photographer decided to take the more gradual incline of the footpath to the bridge, returning thence along the top of the bank.

On reaching the top Saunders gave one quick glance at the still, prone figure half hidden in the long grass, and over which the doctor was still bending. Then he spent some time looking carefully about the ground surrounding the body. Finally he gazed farther afield.

The river bank sloped gradually down to the water some thirty feet below. To the right was Bodden's Bridge, a rickety wooden structure which was little more than a footbridge. To the left the river gradually curved away, disappearing from sight beyond the opposite bank, which was also raised above the surrounding country.

He turned to the constable, who was still standing near the body.

"Found anything, Hudson?" he asked.

"No, sir, not a thing. No sign of a struggle; grass isn't trampled at all."

"True," said Saunders, "and, if the assailant came along

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the bank from the bridge and went away in the same manner, there won't be a hope of finding a footprint anywhere in this long grass. Well, doctor?" he asked, as M'Crae rose to his feet.

"Strangulation, I should say. See those marks on the neck?"

Saunders leaned over to look at the outstretched neck and nodded.

"Fingermarks," said the doctor, briefly.

"See those pieces of earth?" said Saunders a moment later. "They've broken away from the edge under her head. That's why the head is hanging down."

The figure appeared to be that of a girl in the early twenties. She lay flat on her back, one hand across her breast, the other by her side. She wore a grey raincoat which almost completely hid her black dress. There was no sign of a handbag, nor of a hat or cap.

"Poor girl!" said Saunders; "I wonder who she is."

He felt in the pockets of the raincoat and brought out a black leather purse and a handkerchief. The purse contained nothing but a few coppers. He gently felt the hand that lay across her breast.

"No rings—no jewellery at all, not even a necklace. Hands very rough—I should say she was a domestic servant."

He turned to the photographer.

"I want you to take a photo from a position directly overhead, Johnson," he explained, "then one from either side, and finally I want one taken from below there—a view of the inverted face as it is seen by anyone climbing the bank. See that you keep clear of the footprints there."

The photographer nodded and began to fix the tripod into position.

At that moment a figure appeared round the bend of the footpath—a figure carrying what looked like a thick pole, on his shoulder.

“Here comes the ambulance man,” remarked Saunders. “When Johnson has finished, arrange for the body to be taken to the ambulance van, Hudson.”

“Yes, sir,” the constable replied.

Saunders turned towards the river, looking first in the direction of the bridge, then in the other direction.

“I wonder where our informant has got to?” he murmured. “What do you think, Doctor?”

“I should say it’s a case of nerves,” replied M’Crae. “He apparently collapsed in the telephone box while he was speaking to you, then he partially recovered, and now he’s wandered off somewhere in a half-dazed condition.”

“What about someone giving him a knock on the head while he was phoning? I heard a pretty loud crack, you know.”

“Aye, that would be the receiver hitting something as he let go of it. Besides, he’d have told the girl cyclist if he’d been attacked.”

“Maybe he would,” admitted Saunders. “On the other hand, he may have been too dazed. There’s another possibility—the fellow may be the murderer, and have simply made off.”

“What, after first informing the police?” asked the doctor, incredulously.

“Oh, it wouldn’t be the first time a murderer has informed the police of his discovery of the body,” said Saunders, a slight touch of superiority in his tone. “It’s one way of throwing them off the scent. He may have had this idea in his mind and then his nerve failed him as he was phoning.”

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"In which case my diagnosis still holds, though not quite in the way I intended," retorted the doctor.

Saunders stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Whether he's the murderer or not, we know this much about him," he remarked, after a pause. "He's quite a small fellow, not more than five-foot three or so, and slightly built."

The doctor glanced quickly at Saunders and frowned in an effort to recall how he had deduced this piece of information. Then he nodded and smiled.

"Of course," he said, "the small, narrow footprints in the clay at the bottom of the bank."

"And the lightness of the prints, compared with those I made, which sank much deeper," added the inspector.

"Still, I don't think you're justified in fixing the height of the fellow from the size of his feet," objected M'Crae.

"I didn't," replied the other, dryly. "I got that from the position of the mouthpiece in the telephone box. Didn't you notice how low it was tilted?"

Saunders looked away into the distance again, his eyes roving across the fair countryside. Then he turned his gaze down towards the stream flowing below.

"Come along, Doctor," he said, suddenly, "let's see what we can find down here." And he began to descend the grassy slope.

Sometimes in winter and early spring a hurrying torrent, the river was now flowing musically, its waters so low as to be scarcely a yard deep even in the middle of the bed, and the sandy bottom could be seen in many places.

Reaching the water's edge, Saunders began examining very closely the ground, traversing the length of the stream in both directions for a short distance. The doctor watched

him keenly and, when he finally rejoined him, looking somewhat glum, he asked:

"Looking for footprints, Inspector?"

Saunders nodded.

"You noticed those discolourations on the girl's face?" he asked.

"I did," replied M'Crae. "They are caused by the face powder, lipstick and whatnot, which have got smeared over her face."

"And how did they get smeared?" asked Saunders. "There was no rain during the night, there was not even any dew—her clothes are quite dry. There's only one explanation," went on the inspector, answering his own question.

"Those smears were made by someone trying to revive the girl by dabbing her face with a wet cloth—probably a handkerchief.

"And whoever did it came down here for the water, because there was quite a lot of sand on her face."

"I noticed that," assented the doctor. "There were grains in the corners of the eyes, in the nostrils and in the hair near the forehead. But who do you think has tried to revive her?"

"The murderer, I should say."

"But why the murderer?"

"Because probably the attack was sudden—an impulse, a fit of anger, say—followed by a sudden realization of what he had done, and frantic efforts to revive the victim."

He stepped on to a strip of smooth sand, then stepped back again into the rough grass.

"Look!" he said. "What a perfect impression we should have got. These strips of sand are just made for receiving footprints."

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As they gazed at the number eleven imprint, Saunders suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"I say," he said, "what do you make of that?"

He pointed to a smooth, oval-shaped stone which lay partially embedded in the sand about a foot away from the impression he had just made.

"Notice anything about that stone?" Saunders spoke in a tone of suppressed eagerness. The doctor nodded.

"Aye," he replied, "it's quite wet, for one thing."

The inspector gazed momentarily at M'Crae with a look of rather too obvious admiration, which the doctor tried to ignore.

"Now," went on Saunders, gazing at the stone again, "how does it come to be wet? As I've already said, there's been no rain or dew, and it lies well above the water level—in fact, the sand all round it is dry. And look at those other stones there, of similar material and in a similar position—they're bone dry."

"It all means", said the doctor, at the risk of another admiring glance from the other, "that somebody has lifted that stone out of the water and placed it there within the last half-hour or so."

"Why?" asked Saunders, promptly.

The doctor stroked his bony chin and frowned. Saunders thereupon became condescending.

"I'll tell you," he said. "To blot out the footprint we're searching for. Look!"

He lifted the stone carefully, revealing a depression in the sand which was obviously not a true impression of the stone. The sand was loose and roughened, and round the edges of the hollow was a slight ridge of loose sand.

"Clear as that water there," continued the inspector. "Someone's cleverly obliterated the footprint by fishing

the pebble out of the stream and pressing it into the mark.

"He had realized that he could not fill in the impression and leave the sand in as smooth a condition as the surrounding surface by hand."

The doctor nodded his agreement.

"There's another thing," he remarked. "The footprint can't have been a large one—compare it with your own particular effort alongside. By Jove!" he ejaculated, suddenly.

"Yes," added Saunders, "I know what you're going to say. That stone would just about cover one of those small footprints on the other side of the bank, and which were presumably made by the fellow who phoned me. And yet——"

Saunders paused a moment.

"If I could only ask that fellow a question or two," he went on in a lower tone, as though speaking his thoughts aloud, "I could soon find out whether this was his footprint or not."

The doctor seemed rather puzzled by this remark, and was about to speak when Saunders seized his arm.

He had been looking around, but he now turned his gaze with studied attention towards the river directly in front of him.

"There's somebody on the bridge," he muttered; "but don't look round. By all the signs, he's the fellow I want to see."

"The fellow who phoned you?"

Saunders nodded.

"He's very much undersized, he's also very nervous and agitated. He looks all dusty and dishevelled, and there's some clay on the knees of his trousers. Come along, let's

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stroll that way—slowly, or else we might scare him away.

"Oh, and there's one favour I'd like to ask, Doctor. Whatever I say to him when we reach him, I don't want you to interrupt. D'you mind?"

They began ascending the bank diagonally towards the bridge and as they drew near the doctor noticed the stranger was but a youth, barely out of his 'teens, very thin, very white-faced, with wide-open frightened eyes.

He was shabbily dressed, and wore stained grey flannel trousers with extremely wide legs, which almost hid his small, clay-besmeared shoes.

"Good morning," said the inspector, when they reached the bridge. "I'm Inspector Saunders. You phoned me at the police station half an hour ago, didn't you?"

The youth nodded.

"What's your name?" asked Saunders.

"Melling, John Melling."

"Address?"

"Forty-seven, Cannon Street."

"H'm, and why did you leave the telephone so suddenly?"

"I—I came over all queer-like. I think I must have fainted."

The youth's voice was weak and shaky, in keeping with his general appearance.

"And where have you been since you came to?"

"I dunno, sir. I've an idea as I just walked on like. Anywhere, almost."

"But can't you remember something about where you went or what happened?"

"Not much. Now and again I seemed to find miself sitting down on th' roadside, and I'd get up and set off again. Once a girl came and asked me what was th' mat-

ter. I tried to tell 'er and things seemed to get all muddled again, like a bad dream."

"Yes, and what else?"

"I—I kept walking on, and bit by bit mi 'ead got clearer, and I found miself on th' new stone bridge further along th' river. Then it all came back, and I remembered telephoning th' police, so I came round 'ere."

He shuddered violently.

"But I don't want to see that face again," he said.

"No, there's no need for that, Melling," answered Saunders. "But tell me: when you saw the face, did you turn back immediately?"

Melling nodded emphatically.

"You bet I did," he answered.

"Then you didn't reach the top of the bank?"

"Not likely! I made for that there road over there as fast as mi legs 'ud carry me."

"And why did you climb the bank at all?" persisted Saunders. "Why didn't you keep to the footpath?"

"I was in an 'urry, and it's a short cut," replied the youth.

The inspector saw that this was quite true, because the path curved away from the river to circumvent a patch of swamp, then turned in again to the bridge.

"Where were you going?"

"After a job at Tipton—that's why I wor 'ere so early. I expect I'll 'ave missed it now."

"Bit of hard luck if you have," said the inspector. "But I'll see what we can do about it for you later on. Have you a good memory, Melling?"

The youth seemed startled.

"As good as most folks, I reckon," he replied, defensively.

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"Then why have you tied a knot in your handkerchief?" rapped out the inspector.

Melling appeared to gasp, and met the other's searching look with something like a blank stare.

"Why, I—I——" he stammered, and began fumbling for his handkerchief. He went through every pocket of his shabby suit twice, with muttered exclamations of impatience. Then he shook his head and turned an apologetic face to Saunders.

"I 'aven't got one," he said. "Must 'ave forgotten to put one in mi pocket this morning."

"Are you *sure* you haven't got one, Melling?" asked the inspector, sternly.

"Well, you've seen me searching for it," replied the youth, and his tone was not so apologetic this time. "Besides, if you've seen one wi' a knot in it, tell me which pocket it wor in. Another thing, I've never tied a knot in mi 'an'kerchief i' mi life."

"You had one last night, hadn't you?" asked Saunders. "What's become of that?"

"Aye, I had one last night, and I reckon—— 'Ere," he broke off suddenly, and stared defiantly at Saunders. "Wot's the idea like, axing me these questions? You don't think as I'd owt to do wi'—wi'—that——" He indicated the group of figures in the distance, and looked at Saunders with something like a challenge in his watery blue eyes.

"Never mind what I'm thinking, my lad," answered the inspector. "Just answer my questions." He looked steadily at the youth.

"Tell me now," he continued. "Do you know the person that's lying dead over there?"

Melling shook his head, a little doubtfully, it seemed.

"No," he answered, "I don't think as I do, but I couldn't

swear to it, 'cos as I've told you th' face wor upside down when I see'd it."

Saunders's next question so startled the doctor that he almost forgot the inspector's cautionary advice.

"Then," said Saunders, "you can't really say, Melling, whether you've seen the man before or not—you can't tell me, for instance, if he's a local man?"

The answer provided another shock for Dr. M'Crae.

"No," replied the youth. "I can't say for certain whether I've seen the man before or not."

The doctor was watching both questioner and questioned very keenly. The inspector showed no surprise at the answer, and there had not been any noticeable change in the youth's expression.

He had treated the question, strange as it was, as a normal one, and had apparently given what was to him a normal answer.

The next moment the doctor noticed a sudden change in the youth's face. The scared, startled expression became intensified, and the pallor of his skin was accentuated.

M'Crae saw that he was looking beyond them, along the river bank. He turned and noticed that the three men were slowly walking towards them. P.C. Hudson was in front, the ambulance man was in direct line behind him, and between them they were carrying the stretcher and its burden. The photographer followed behind, encumbered as usual with his apparatus.

"I—I say," said Melling, and there was fear in his voice, "I—I don't want to see that—that face again."

"You won't, Melling," Saunders assured him. The inspector had turned to follow Melling's gaze at the same time as M'Crae. "It's covered."

The little procession drew nearer, and they stepped back

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to allow it to pass. The still form on the stretcher was covered with a white sheet—all except the feet and ankles, and the lower part of the coat and skirt.

As they drew level with the three on the bridge, Melling suddenly broke the silence with a stifled cry.

"My Gawd!" he ejaculated, "it's——"

"Silence!" rapped out the inspector.

The procession passed along the footpath, and not until they were almost out of sight did the inspector turn to the youth, still staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed along the path.

"Now!" said Saunders, looking questioningly at the youth.

Melling raised a trembling hand to his mouth, and spoke in a strained, high-pitched voice.

"Wot the 'ell——" he said, hysterically, "wot the 'ell does it mean? That wor a *woman*!"

"Look here, Saunders," said Dr. M'Crae, "I can't understand it at all. Have there been *two* murders? If so, where's the body of the man? And who's the murderer, anyway?"

Inspector Saunders showed his teeth in a smile and shook his head. He was seated in his room several hours later and the doctor had just entered.

"Sit down, Doctor," he said, "and I'll explain. But first tell me, have you discovered anything further from your more thorough examination?"

"Not much," replied the other, shaking his head. "It's strangulation, as I said at first, but it's only partly strangulation—it's mainly shock.

"She died some time between ten and twelve o'clock last night, and the fact that shock has contributed to the cause

of death indicates that the assailant had not intended to kill her, but possibly only to give her a fright. That was your theory, Saunders, and I must say it looks like being the right one."

"You mean about the murderer himself trying to revive her?" asked the inspector. "Must have been one of my unlucky shots," he added with a grimace.

"Unlucky?" queried M'Crae. "You mean your theory was wrong?"

Saunders nodded, and before the other could question him further, he asked:

"Did you discover anything else—any clues?"

"Not a thing! What about *your* inquiries?"

"Not very exciting. Her name was Martha Grey. She was a domestic servant (I was right there, Doctor!) and had been in this town only about five weeks. She had made no friends here, with the possible exception of the murderer. She has no relatives except an old aunt in Shropshire.

"She was given an evening out twice a week and used to go for short walks on these evenings—alone, as her employers thought. Last night she went out and never returned."

"Have you found out whether the girl and the youth Melling were acquainted?"

"I don't believe they were even known to each other by sight," answered Saunders. "In any case, you can take it from me that Melling did not kill the girl, nor had he anything to do with the crime beyond discovering the body."

The doctor sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Oho!" he said, "and how did you discover that?"

"I knew it before we left Bodden's Bridge this morning."

Dr. M'Crae was puzzled—and annoyed. His next remark was tinged with sarcasm.

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"I'm afraid I can't follow your reasoning, Saunders," he said. "Ye'll be telling me next that ye know who *did* commit the crime."

He got the shock of his life when the inspector replied.

"I do," he said, laconically.

"Ye know who did it?" asked M'Crae, incredulously.

"More than that," replied Saunders, "we've got him."

"Got him?" The doctor was pop-eyed with surprise. "Then who——"

"There were only three people who could have done it," interrupted Saunders.

"When did ye realize that?" asked M'Crae.

"A few minutes after we arrived at the scene of the crime this morning. When I found that Melling could be left out of our calculations it became a question of concentrating on the other two."

"And who were these two, and how did you know there were only two?"

"Suppose I try to explain how I got the criminal, right from the beginning?" suggested Saunders.

The doctor nodded his assent, and leaned back in his chair to listen.

"It all began when we first saw the face hanging upside down at the top of the embankment," said Saunders. "Did you notice anything, Doctor—anything unusual or striking, I mean?"

"It was a pretty awful sight," replied M'Crae, "and the general appearance of the face, with its darkened skin and bulging eyes, gave me at once the impression of strangulation."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing, except the smears of lipstick and face powder, and, of course, the grains of sand in the eyes and nostrils."

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"H'm. I suppose it's because you had been told, as I had, that the victim was a woman. But suppose we hadn't known the sex beforehand?"

The doctor sat straight up.

"I see what you're getting at," he said. "Now you mention it, I realize that, from the position we were in when we first saw the face, there was nothing to indicate whether it was that of a man or a woman."

"More than that," supplemented Saunders. "It looked, with the black, tousled, short hair, the largish mouth, and the horrible grimace, more like a man's face."

"Taking into consideration the position of the footprints on the side of the bank, and knowing our informant was a short man, I realized he could have seen nothing but the face if his story was true; and that, if he had any definite opinion at all on the matter, it would be that he had seen a *man's* face."

"Yet I had been informed by Hudson over the phone that the victim was a woman. Further, I was certain Melling did not mention the sex to me."

"The question was, therefore, if Melling did not know it was a woman's face he had seen, how did Hudson know? You know how I tested my theory, by speaking to Melling before he had an opportunity of seeing the body again, or of meeting anyone who had, and casually referring to the victim as a man."

"It's beginning to dawn on me," replied the doctor. "But I also remember you tried to get a view of his handkerchief."

The inspector smiled.

"Yes, I tried that first," he admitted. "There was just the possibility that if he were the criminal and had endeavoured to revive the girl, he might still have the

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handkerchief showing signs of immersion in the river."

"Weren't you suspicious when he failed to produce a handkerchief?"

"Not after he had taken for granted my reference to the victim as a man. I had now to consider the other possibilities—you'll be able to name them now?"

"Yes, I follow you now. The only two people who could have caused Hudson to refer to the victim as a woman—either the girl cyclist or Hudson himself."

"Exactly, and remembering the small-sized footprint which had been covered by the stone near the edge of the water, I tried the girl first. I asked her to give me, as near as she could remember, the words spoken to her by Melling. She wrote them down; she also wrote down what she said to Hudson."

"Then I got Hudson in. Mind you, neither knew what I was after. Hudson agreed that the words written down were substantially the same as spoken to him. Then I dropped my thunderbolt, for neither message contained any reference to the sex of the victim."

" 'Now Hudson,' I said, 'how do you explain the fact that you told me it was a woman's body which had been seen?'"

"At first he was puzzled, for he had not realized the situation. When he did, he tried to bluster a bit and said that the youth must have said he'd seen a woman and that both he and the cyclist had omitted to realize their mistake."

"Of course, I countered this by asking: 'Are you aware that Melling has said that he thought the face he saw was the face of a man?' He was taken aback when he comprehended the question, and his discomfiture increased when I showed him this."

Saunders picked up a photograph from the table and

handed it to the doctor. It was a view of the inverted face taken from the side of the embankment.

"Remarkable," muttered M'Crae as he examined the print. "Anyone would take that for a man's face."

"The next thing that happened," continued the inspector, "was that the girl cyclist, Jennie Hall, broke down and between her sobs she began to say things to Hudson. I then realized for the first time that they knew each other, and soon I learned that they were, in fact, lovers. Gradually the whole story came out.

"Briefly, it appears Hudson had come across the other girl—Martha Grey—some weeks ago, probably on one of her lonely evening walks, and had started a double game, meeting her after dusk on her evenings out and at other times openly courting Jennie.

"The game didn't last long. Last night Martha saw Hudson walking along with Jennie and followed them to Bodden's Bridge. There she overtook them and naturally began to ask Hudson a few questions.

"As far as I can gather, she grew hysterical and even flew at the other girl. To avoid a scene and to protect Jennie, Hudson tried to frighten her by seizing her round the throat. She struggled fiercely, and I suppose that made Hudson grip the harder.

"Suddenly she collapsed and lay limp on the ground. They tried to bring her round and became alarmed when they failed. This had all happened on the bridge, which explains the absence of any signs of trampling in the grass round the body.

"Later, to avoid the chance of a passer-by seeing them, Hudson carried Martha along the embankment. There they tried again to bring her round, and the other girl descended the bank to the stream and, having soaked her

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handkerchief in the water, returned to sponge the unconscious Martha's face.

"That explains the small footprint which Hudson tried to obliterate by covering it with a pebble next morning while awaiting our arrival. By the way, he had plenty of time to do this because he got a lift from a passing motor lorry after he had phoned me.

"They realized at last that Martha was dead, and they decided to leave her there in the hope that, as nobody had seen the girl with them, they would not be suspected. Hudson, for his part, had kept his friendship with the girl very secret, even using a false name and hiding from her the fact that he was in the Force."

"Well, it's been a wonderfully quick piece of work," said the doctor, as Saunders paused. "I congratulate you. Looking back, I can see that the case pivoted on your realizing that Melling, if he spoke the truth, could not have known the sex of the victim, and Hudson *did* know."

"'Twas a lucky coincidence that Jennie met Melling when she did," added Saunders.

M'Crae pondered a moment.

"I wonder why she went through the farce of reporting it to Hudson?" he asked. "Why didn't she just ride away without saying a word to anyone?"

"I asked her that," said Saunders, "and she explained that she decided to do exactly what she would have done had she known nothing about the matter.

"She believed that to be the safest way, since there was always the risk of Melling recognizing her later, and there may have been other witnesses of her action in dismounting from her machine and speaking to the half-dazed youth.

"Hudson reported the case for similar reasons, and also because it gave him an opportunity of surveying the scene

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of the crime first and of removing any possible clues."

"I suppose they were, in theory, right," said the doctor;
"but in practice, unlucky."

Saunders pushed back his chair.

"In a nutshell," he remarked, his arms extended and his palms pressed against the edge of the table, "the criminal convicted himself out of his own mouth. If he hadn't done so we might never have suspected him, because nobody appears to have known of his association with the victim."

He rose and stretched himself, arms above his head.

"Well," he said, "that's all there is to explain, Doctor.
... No, there's one other matter."

"Yes?"

Saunders smiled broadly as he reached for his hat.

"I managed to get little Melling that job he was going after this morning," he said.

~~21.1.1911~~

No.

Please read it carefully and
think about it.

Reader's it is now my
turn and I got it. & the boy
who had written these words already
is fool & mad.

~~the boy who~~ are you

V. Good

BY
BRANDON FLEMING

★

THE UNCONSIDERED TRIFLE

The two men faced each other. Neither spoke for some moments. Wilder, standing with clenched hands, was white and drawn. Ensor leant back in his chair, smoking quietly, his hard eyes fixed on Wilder's strained face.

Ensor spoke first.

"You can take it or leave it," he said curtly. "It's all you'll get."

Wilder did not move. Ensor took up his glass from the small table by his chair and drank.

"Three hundred pounds—and be out of the country in two days. Those are my terms. I shan't alter them by a penny or an hour. Three hundred pounds and freedom—or certainly not less than five years' penal servitude."

He put his glass down, and sat up impatiently.

"Well, which is it to be?"

Wilder's face whitened.

"*Three hundred*—when I have put more than as many thousands into the business! You have a great idea of fairness, George Ensor!"

"Those are my terms," Ensor repeated. "I will not discuss them any further. You can please yourself."

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"You are seizing this opportunity to force me out of the business and keep my capital for yourself," Wilder exclaimed furiously.

Ensor shrugged his shoulders.

"People must pay for their crimes," he retorted. "I consider I am treating you very leniently. You have not only defrauded *me* as your partner, but you have misused—I put it mildly—money entrusted to the firm."

"Your own dealings with the firm's money have not always been beyond suspicion," Wilder sneered.

"Possibly not," Ensor returned easily; "but I have been wise enough to keep within the law—and you have been unwise enough to go outside it. That is the difference."

"I have told you," Wilder said eagerly, "I will undertake to replace every penny I have taken within six months."

Ensor rose.

"You have had my answer to that suggestion. I refuse. I will not allow you to have any further connection, directly or indirectly, with the business. You shall not enter the office again. I have given you the choice of two things. You must decide now which you are going to take."

He turned away, and going to the open French windows, looked out into the dull, close night. Although there was a busy street within a hundred yards, a curious quietness seemed to hang over the garden. Perhaps the great trees all round shut out the sounds of the movement and traffic. The masses of foliage stood out just darker than the sky behind them, unmoving in the still air.

"The rain has stopped," Ensor said.

He turned back.

"I can only give you another five minutes," he said.

"Someone is coming to see me at ten."

THE UNCONSIDERED TRIFLE

"A woman, I suppose?" Wilder retorted.

Ensor smiled unpleasantly.

"It is possible! A very foolish one—who has been almost as unwise in her way as you have been in yours. I am afraid the interview will be a trying one."

If he had noticed the change that sprang into Wilder's face, the sudden alertness, the narrowing of the eyes, he might have taken warning. But he had gone back to the table and drained his glass. Wilder controlled himself with an effort.

"So that is why your household staff have all been sent out for the evening?" he said slowly. "To leave you a clear field for your—er—interview with the lady?"

Sudden anger blazed into Ensor's face.

"Please leave my private affairs alone," he said harshly. "You have quite enough to do to look after your own."

Wilder laughed.

"It would be interesting to know her errand—at this time of night," he said carelessly.

They looked at each other steadily. Ensor was hard and lowering.

"My terms have changed," he said deliberately. "They are now *two* hundred, instead of three. You have one minute to make up your mind."

He turned his back on Wilder, and began to pour himself out another drink. The face of the man behind him was convulsed with an expression of savage hatred. His hands were so tightly clenched that the veins stood out on them like cords. On his left there was a table of Oriental curios.

His fingers closed over the hilt of a long, curved knife. . . .

Ensor drank, and put his glass down. The sound of a movement caused him to turn quickly. He saw Wilder's livid face . . . the knife in his hand.

BRANDON FLEMING

"You fool!" he cried sharply. "Put that thing down!"

He drew back, putting out his hands to ward off the blow . . . too late. A dreadful tearing pain . . . he crumpled up, choking, on the floor. . . .

Wilder stood still, looking down at the body. His first sensation was one of a curious surprise at what had happened.

Ensor was dead. He, Richard Wilder, had killed him. A murderer. . . .

He passed a hand across his forehead. He was a murderer. He had taken up that ugly curved knife with the deliberate intention of killing Ensor . . . and driven it home with pitiless strength. The knife remained in the wound, the handle jutting out from the huddled figure on the floor. A dark stain was spreading on the carpet.

He drew back. He was rather pleased at his own coolness.

He felt no regret or remorse for what he had done. It was Ensor's own fault. The fool had driven him to it. It served him right for attempting to force him out of his fair share of the business. For a moment he even felt a little proud of this demonstration that he was not to be taken advantage of in such a fashion. Ensor was the only man in the world who had known of his defalcations. There was no one else. And Ensor was dead.

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was five minutes to ten. In another five minutes this woman, whoever she was, would come.

He looked round carefully. There were one or two signs of his own presence to be removed. He pushed the chair he had sat upon back to its usual position, and smoothed the cushions. He did not intend to make any mistake. There would be no clue to point to himself. He took out his hand-

THE UNCONSIDERED TRIFLE

kerchief and carefully wiped the handle of the knife without disturbing it. Then he went on quickly to wipe everything else he might have touched.

Putting the handkerchief back into his pocket he made another careful scrutiny of the room. There were many famous cases in which some stupid little point had been overlooked, and had led to detection—something that a child should not have neglected. He would not be caught like that. He was going to be much too careful. There should be no unconsidered trifle, no fatal little slip.

Nothing whatever to suggest that he had been in the room, or in the house. . . .

At the door he stopped for a final glance round. Not a thing there that could point to Richard Wilder. . . . Not one. He took out his handkerchief again and put it over the handle of the door before he opened it. In the dark hall he felt his way to the table and took up his hat. Cautiously opening the front door, he slipped out of the house. For a moment he stood still, listening, his senses almost painfully taut.

Then he crept quickly round by the wall.

The house stood some way back from the road, and was well hidden by trees and a high fence. There was a semi-circular drive from one gate to another. Wilder went round to the garage yard where he had left his car. Standing by it he made certain that no one approaching the house by either of the gates could see it. Then he went on further round to the far corner at the back of the house where he could watch the library windows.

It was a desperate chance, but he did not hesitate. He felt perfectly safe. He was quite sure he had not overlooked the unconsidered trifle.

He saw the girl come round the opposite corner of the

BRANDON FLEMING

house and slip in through the library window. He had expected that. Ensor's manner when he had looked out into the garden after the rain had told him that it had been arranged that the visitor should come that way. He slipped back to the front of the house and hurried down the drive.

He knew there was a police station a few yards round the corner in the main street. He went in and asked for the inspector in charge.

The inspector in charge was consuming a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

Wilder's manner showed just a sufficient shade of anxiety.

"Inspector, I'm afraid there may be something wrong at Mr. Ensor's house round the corner. I had an appointment to call at ten o'clock, but I couldn't make anyone hear. There are no lights in the front, and the whole place seems to be deserted."

He paused for a moment.

"My name is Wilder. I am Mr. Ensor's partner. We had important business to discuss to-night. Will you send someone back with me to investigate?"

The inspector reached for his hat.

"I'll come with you myself, sir. I know Mr. Ensor."

They hurried to the house. The dark shape of it loomed out against the pale sky. There seemed to be something particularly black and sinister about it. The inspector rang and knocked loudly. He opened the letter-box and listened. There was no sound in the house.

"Don't like the look of it," he muttered.

He rang again.

"What can have happened to the servants?" Wilder whispered. "There were three of them."

The inspector turned away from the door.

THE UNCONSIDERED TRIFLE

"I'm going round to the back," he said. "There's something wants looking into here."

They went quietly round the house.

"There's a light in the library," Wilder said softly. "The window is open."

The inspector signed him to silence, and crept noiselessly up to the window. Wilder followed him. They peered round into the room. The body of Ensor was hidden from them by the couch and the armchair he had been sitting on.

The girl was standing at Ensor's desk, rapidly running through the contents of the drawers. It was evident that the knocking at the front door had alarmed her, for she was scattering the papers right and left, pausing once or twice to listen intently. She was wrapped in a dark cloak, and a small black hat framed a face that was strikingly beautiful in spite of its deathly whiteness.

They saw her glance down, shuddering, at something on the floor, her eyes wide with horror. Then the inspector stepped into the room, Wilder behind him.

The girl screamed and shrank back, staring at them terror-stricken.

"What do you want?" she gasped faintly.

Before the inspector could speak a startled shout came from Wilder.

"My God, look there!"

He knelt on the floor.

"It's Ensor!" he cried. "Stabbed!" *stabbed*

The inspector looked down at the huddled figure, then at the white face of the girl.

"From the look of it," he returned grimly, "I should say I want *you*."

He turned back, and, closing the windows, fastened them securely.

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"You stay where you are, young lady," he ordered. "Don't move an inch!"

Wilder looked up.

"He's quite dead," he said slowly. He got up unsteadily. For a moment he seemed to be dazed. "Poor fellow," he muttered. "It's dreadful. . . ."

He turned to the girl.

"In heaven's name, how did you come to do such a terrible thing?"

She came closer to them. There was something very like madness in her eyes.

"I didn't do it!" she cried wildly. "I never touched him!"

Wilder shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid it seems pretty obvious," he said curtly.

The inspector had been bending over the body. Then he straightened himself, and looked steadily at the girl.

"It's my duty to warn you," he said stolidly, "that anything you say may be used in evidence."

She brought her hands together desperately. Her voice rose almost to a scream.

"I tell you I didn't kill him! I swear I didn't! He was lying there when I came in."

The inspector took out his notebook.

"You were going through his papers," he said sharply. "You aren't denying *that*, I suppose?"

She put a hand on the back of a chair to steady herself. She was shaking pitifully.

"I was looking for something," she murmured weakly.

"What?"

She was silent.

"You'd better not try to hide anything," the inspector warned her. "Your best chance is to tell us the whole truth."

THE UNCONSIDERED TRIFLE

She leant heavily on the chair.

"I was looking . . . for a letter."

"That you had written to Mr. Ensor?"

It seemed for a moment as if she was going to faint. But she controlled herself with a great effort.

"Yes . . . I wrote it to him."

Then suddenly she stood upright, flooded with passion, her eyes blazing with fierce anger.

"He forced me to come here to-night," she cried. "It was my only chance to get the letter back. He said if I didn't come he'd pass it on to . . . someone else."

Her voice broke.

"He was wicked and cruel," she sobbed. "He didn't care how much unhappiness he brought on other people. I didn't kill him—but I'm glad he's dead!"

Again she faced them defiantly. "You can do what you like to me!" she cried recklessly. "I tell you I'm glad he's dead! I'm glad! I'm glad!"

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing wildly.

"Steady on," the inspector said, not unkindly. "You'd better not talk like that."

He turned to Wilder.

"Well, sir, you were his partner—what do you think about it?"

"I can't understand it," Wilder returned slowly. "I did not know very much about his private life, but I certainly had no grounds for suspecting such things as this lady suggests. It is a complete surprise to me."

The inspector closed his notebook, and put it back in his pocket.

"Suppose she was telling the truth, and he really *was* lying there when she came in. . . ."

The girl uncovered her face, looking at him eagerly.

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"He was!" she cried. "I swear to you he was!"

The inspector silenced her.

"Assuming it to be true for the moment, can you, from your knowledge of him, make any suggestion?"

Wilder shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't," he said regretfully. "For her own sake I should be glad to be able to think that it *was* true—but it really seems too plain. Of course, it's *possible*. . . ." He made a reluctant gesture. "But as it stands there doesn't seem much room for doubt."

The girl sank weakly into a chair, and again buried her face in her hands. The inspector stood looking down at her for a moment. Then he went nearer to Wilder.

"You feel satisfied about it yourself?" he asked, in a low tone.

"I am afraid I must be," Wilder replied. "I'm sorry for the girl, but it seems a perfectly clear case."

"I admit it's clear enough," the Inspector agreed, "and yet——"

He looked at the girl again.

"I don't like it," he confessed frankly. "I can't help feeling there's something deeper in it. I've had a good deal of experience with witnesses, and I believe she's telling the truth. The worst of it is, on the face of it I haven't any option but to arrest her and charge her with the murder."

Wilder's face expressed genuine anxiety.

"I don't see how you can help it," he agreed. "I will give you all the assistance I can in any direction, but on the evidence you have now I am afraid you cannot do anything but take her in charge at once."

The inspector scratched his head with his pencil.

"I suppose there's a telephone here, sir?"

"It's in the hall," Wilder replied.

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"I wonder if you'd be kind enough," the inspector suggested softly, "to ring up the station—Burnwell 439—and tell Constable Martin to run over to Doctor Singleton's house, and bring him along here at once? I don't want to leave her."

"Certainly," Wilder said.

He went out of the room. When he had closed the door behind him, his face was transformed by an expression of savage exultation. In the reaction of the moment he had to check an inclination to laugh out loud. Luck had been with him all the way; luck and his own astuteness. All he had to do was to play his part out.

He felt no pity for the girl, no remorse. All his life he had been supremely selfish, entirely without scruple. He had always been content if the blame for his own misdoings fell on someone else.

The thought that was uppermost in his mind as he took up the telephone receiver was that now the business was all his; his own defalcations could be covered up; he could use or misuse as he wished. . . .

He gave the inspector's message to the police station, and went back to the room.

The girl had fainted when the inspector told her she would be charged with the murder of George Ensor. When Wilder returned the inspector was trying to revive her with whisky from the bottle on the table, but she did not recover until the doctor and the constable arrived.

"We'll leave Martin here with the doctor, and get her to the station," the inspector said to Wilder. "I'll have to question her pretty fully. Perhaps you wouldn't mind coming too, in case any questions crop up that you could help us with."

"Certainly I'll come with you," Wilder replied. "I've got my car here. We can run round in it."

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The inspector took the girl's arm, and led her out of the room. She obeyed mechanically, staring out straight in front of her. She seemed to be dazed and weak.

Wilder opened the front door.

"The car is in the yard," he said. "Ensor did not like cars to be left in front of the house."

They went round to the yard. The girl leant heavily on the inspector's arm. She had almost to be lifted into the back of the car, and sank on to the seat as if exhausted. The inspector shut the door on her, and strolled round the front of the car, while Wilder started up the engine.

Suddenly he took his electric torch from his pocket and, stooping down, flashed the light under the car.

Wilder jumped out and came to him quickly.

"What are you doing?" he demanded sharply.

The inspector straightened himself, and put the torch back into his pocket. He looked steadily at Wilder.

"It is nearly an hour, Mr. Wilder," he said quietly, "Since the rain stopped. It lasted for about three-quarters of an hour."

"Well?" Wilder said.

The inspector's eyes were fixed on his face.

"It is just over half an hour since you came to the police station."

"Well?" Wilder said again.

The inspector took a step closer to him.

"The ground under the car is perfectly dry," he said slowly. "It was put here before the rain began. When you came to the station and told me that you could not make anyone hear, Mr. Wilder, you had been at this house not less than an hour and a quarter. It would be interesting to know what you were doing."

Wilder's face blanched. For an instant his head swam.

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He stared at the Inspector, a white horror growing in his face.

The unconsidered trifle. . . .

He stood perfectly still. The inspector's hand closed on his wrist.

"I told you I believed she was speaking the truth. . . ."

He uttered a savage oath, and tried to wrench himself free. He heard the girl scream as the inspector bent him over backwards and pinned him down on the ground.

HOTORE



Please Also See Pages 301, 302 & 303

Now you find that Miss -

have been found at 1000
your father's house. and the girl
the woman who is the girl's friend.

Inspector the woman's name is

the woman's name is

137

Young

Ros

Good

BY

CASWELL GARTH

★

THE MAN WITH THE SMALL FEET

The following facts are set down in the hope that a great wrong may thereby be righted. In the hope that those who read may be induced to take action and an innocent man be set at liberty. Had I sufficient means to embark on a campaign for that purpose I should unhesitatingly do so. As it is, I can only set down the facts of the matter as they came to my notice in the hope that those who read, if they are persuaded of the truth of my statement, may communicate with me in order that we may jointly take action. In no way shall I attempt to embellish this account by the tricks of the writer's art. I am all too conscious of the fact that the pen is an unfamiliar tool to me. My narrative will, I fear, be halting and disjointed. But if Truth is thereby brought to light I shall rest content that I have done what little lay in my power to see Justice done.

On the afternoon of September the fourteenth last I had occasion to travel from Truro to London. The reason for my journey is no part of this story. It will be sufficient for me to state, regarding myself, that I am not by nature fanciful nor given to making mountains out of mole-hills.

THE MAN WITH SMALL FEET

My friends, in fact, consider me something of a Doubting Thomas. Which, perhaps, is the reason why I have kept this matter to myself until now. No one likes to be laughed at. But no man could endure longer the twinges of conscience with which the suppression of the details of that journey left me.

From Truro to Plymouth the journey was uneventful. I cannot afford to travel first-class. But, like so many others in the same state, I nevertheless do so. Chiefly for the privacy it ensures. From Truro to Plymouth I had a compartment to myself and rejoiced accordingly. If I remember rightly I dozed most of the time. But at Plymouth my slumbers were rudely disturbed. I am not, I think, an unsociable man. True, I am still a bachelor. But I have a wide circle of friends. One thing, however, I cannot tolerate, the inane conversation one is forced to indulge in when a complete stranger buttonholes one in a railway carriage. Trivial conversation is an abomination to me. Trivial conversation with a stranger one has never seen before, and hopes never to see again, is, to me, the last straw. In the past I have suffered so much from this bane of all travellers that I have become somewhat wary. I can size up a person immediately. I know the talkers by instinct. At the first sign that they are about to practise their arts on me I close up like an oyster. I know all the opening gambits. And ignore them. The polite inquiry as to what time the train may be expected to reach its destination. The request for a match. All are known to me. And to all I return a freezing stare. I mention these matters in order that you shall know I am not a man who delights in idle chatter. On this occasion I was particularly annoyed that my privacy should be broken into, as, not having had time to glance at a paper that morning, and having roused myself at Plymouth, I

had just settled back into my corner prepared for a quiet read. But as soon as I saw the travelling companion some fool of a porter had thrust on me I realized I should have to use all my skill if I were to remain oblivious of his presence.

Not that the man who entered the compartment was in any way aggressive. Far from it. He was small. Undersized in fact. With straggling sandy hair and pale watery eyes. Well dressed. About fifty. With large, round glasses which he continually removed from his thin twitching nose, to wipe carefully on an expensive-looking silk handkerchief, and then replace. Over and over again. It was that which aroused my worst fears. He was that most ghastly of travelling companions, the elderly fidget. I knew it would not be long before he was trifling with the *hot-cold* switch, re-adjusting his suitcase on the rack, or altering the ventilators. Forewarned is forearmed. I plunged deeply into my paper, determined to forget all about him. If he would let me.

He didn't. The train was still winding its way over the mass of points outside the station when he started. Did I know what time the train reached Paddington? How often did it stop? Could I tell him if he could obtain dinner on the train? To all of which I answered "No". Just the one word. "No".

Then he started to fidget. First he took off his heavy travelling coat. Then he put it on again. He had lost his gloves. He searched his pockets for his ticket. Found it, and removed it to another pocket. Then continually patted it as if to assure it that it was not travelling alone. I suppose I am by nature somewhat irritable. I saw, at any rate, that if I had to endure this sort of thing all the way to London I should step into my taxi a nervous wreck. I therefore de-

THE MAN WITH SMALL FEET

cided to take drastic action. The train was pretty crowded; it was doubtful if I should get another compartment to myself. Besides, apart from my companion, I was perfectly comfortable where I was. So I decided to put one of my favourite plans into action. It was Napoleon, wasn't it, who said the best defence is attack? Whoever said it, I've found it to be very true. Therefore, although normally mild, when confronted with a case like this I had a definite plan of campaign. The attack. I set out to make myself as aggressively unpleasant as possible. If we had to talk we would talk briefly. Pointedly. And then peace for the rest of the journey. I recommend this plan to fellow sufferers. Some, of course, may object to travelling with an incensed companion for three hundred miles or so. I myself rather enjoy it. A glow of righteousness fills me.

I therefore opened my attack. On the window. While I was alone I had had it open just a reasonable distance. At Plymouth, my unwelcome companion had drawn it up just before the train started. Now, therefore, without a word to him, I let it down full length. With a rattle and a bang. I expected a heated protest. After which we should indulge in a few words. Subsequently, if things went as usual and my flow of repartee didn't desert me, the remainder of the journey would be one of icy and most welcome silence.

But my companion did not rise to the fly. He merely drew his coat closer round him and remarked that the weather was seasonable. In a moment I felt somewhat ashamed of myself. After all, he was no longer young. In a moment of weakness I asked him if he found the draught too much. His reply astonished me. He looked up, smiled at me out of his watery eyes, and said—Well, I suppose his words were not so very remarkable after all. Not until

you've heard what followed. But, somehow, they surprised me even then.

"If", he said, "the draught had in any way incommoded me, I should, I assure you, have taken steps to prevent its entrance." Just that. I was so surprised that I just stared at him. He returned my stare with the kindest of smiles and continued:

"I was, at one time, extremely sensitive to draughts. My chest, you know. It used to trouble me. Now, however——"

What prompted me to continue the conversation Heaven knows I certainly wasn't interested in his chest. But I asked him about it all the same.

"You took steps to remove the trouble?"

He smiled again, his little eyes positively beaming with kindness.

"I took steps. Yes."

"Some new cure?"

"Not exactly. It was an experience I underwent. And afterwards I—I felt a different man. They say the brain governs the body. I found it so in my case. I had always been of a somewhat timid nature. But, after taking one decisive action, I found my whole system toned up in the most amazing way."

I felt I was in for it. Some long-winded story about his boyhood. Or an account of the treatment at some new Spa. I cursed myself for opening my mouth. To my surprise, however, the stranger did not speak again for some time. He just gazed in front of him, and I was free to return to my paper. A good hour passed, in fact, before he spoke again. When he did I was rather at a loss to know what he was talking about.

"An interesting case, isn't it?"

I lowered my paper. "I beg your pardon?"

THE MAN WITH SMALL FEET

"The Hatton Garden affair."

"Oh. Yes. Very." I'd been reading a full account of the Hatton Garden trial in an inner page of the paper, and realized that he must have seen the headlines on the front page, which I had folded back so that it faced him.

"Is the verdict given?"

"Yes. Guilty."

"Dear, dear, dear——" He made such a mournful little clucking noise and looked so deeply distressed that I nearly laughed.

"Had you any interest in the case?"

"I? In a murder trial? Gracious no."

I hastened to reassure him. "I merely thought, from your mentioning it, that you might be acquainted with one of the counsel."

"Oh, dear me, no. I'm afraid I have no friends in such high places. As a matter of fact, I've never been near a Law Court in my life."

I could well believe it. He was such a very ordinary little man. I read more of the evidence and then turned to him again.

"I should say that, but for one tiny slip, the murderer himself might never have come within sight of a Law Court either. I see Counsel for the Crown calls it 'A perfect murder'."

The little man looked quite shocked and held up a protesting hand.

"Not perfect. No, really I can't pass that. *Not* perfect."

"A very near thing to it."

"Granted. Certainly. But not perfect. Otherwise the murderer would never have found himself in the dock. That, after all, is the acid test."

"You mean that the really artistic murderer is never discovered at all?"

"Exactly."

"And how many really artistic murderers do you suppose there are about?"

"Well——" The little man snuggled deeper into his overcoat and reflected a moment. "I only know of one."

I sat bolt upright. "Would you mind saying that again?"

"I only know", he said, "of one." He seemed, I thought, quite sorry to confess it. For myself, I continued to stare at him.

"The facts are very simple. If you'd like to hear them?"

I threw down my paper. "I should very much like to hear them."

The little man didn't start right away though. And when he did speak, turning from looking out of the window, it was to ask me a question.

"Have you ever been to Dartmoor—to the prison there?"

I suppose I replied in the negative somewhat abruptly because he laughed. "Oh, I meant as a visitor."

"No. Have you?"

"I have just come from there."

I looked at him with renewed interest.

"An unfortunate man, an acquaintance of mine let me call him, has been in there for—let me see—it must be eleven years now."

I could scarcely repress a shudder. "A life sentence?"

"They called it so. Actually he will be released shortly. Good conduct has already mitigated some of the hardships of his lot. He now helps in the library there. A charming man."

"Might I ask his name?"

"I don't see any harm in your knowing. It all happened

THE MAN WITH SMALL FEET

so long ago. And I have explained that he was only an acquaintance. I——” The little man smiled. “I have a tender heart, I suppose. But, learning that visits were very occasionally permitted, and as he had no other relatives or friends, I have made it my business to see him whenever possible. It cheers him up.” His face became creased with smiles. “Upon my soul, it cheers us both up. To see each other, you know.”

“His name?”

“Tracy Heritage.”

I looked up sharply. “*The Heritage?*”

“Ah. . . . You remember the case? A distressing affair, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t remember the details. Only that he was convicted of murder but never hanged. There was a re-trial, wasn’t there?”

“Yes. The jury fortunately disagreed the first time. Even in the final trial there was a doubt. So they gave him the benefit, and brought in a recommendation for mercy. The evidence was purely circumstantial. Had he been tried in Scotland the verdict would doubtless have been ‘Not Proven’. As it was—penal servitude for life. The thing that saved him from the greater penalty was that there was no apparent motive. Absolutely none. Everyone felt he’d done it but. . . . That ‘but’ saved his neck. But not his liberty.”

“How has he borne his sentence?”

“Marvellously. He considers himself an innocent man, you see. He lives for the day when, at liberty, he can fight to establish his innocence.”

“And you will be with him to help?”

“Unfortunately, no. My health you know. . . . For some time my doctors have begged me to live abroad. But I prefer England. I much prefer it. Although I ought to

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have gone abroad long ago. In fact, in another year or two, just when, unfortunately, Heritage will be at liberty, my life will positively depend on my going abroad."

I could see he was delicate. But he looked so cheerful discussing his sad state that I couldn't help liking him. I settled back in my corner.

"I don't remember the case very well. What were the details?"

"Oh, very simple. Painfully simple. Prescott Priors was the scene of the crime. Do you know the place?"

I had heard of Prescott, of course. As a charming little fishing village in Cornwall much loved by artists and retired folk. But I'd never been there, so I shook my head.

"Then you wouldn't know Lintoft Towers. A private hotel, you know. A boarding-house really. But 'hotel' looks well on the notepaper. And it really is, or was at the time, an extremely well run place. A commercial hotel in miniature best describes it. No licence, but of a fair size, separate tables, a porter and all that. At the time I'm speaking of it could take about seventy people. And in August they got them. But in the off season they were lucky to have as many guests as they had. Eighteen, if I remember rightly. Mostly retired people, resident there, at reduced terms, for the winter."

"I remember some of the details now. It was one of the hotel guests that was killed, wasn't it?" I corrected myself. "Murdered, I should say."

"I prefer", said my companion, "to use the word 'killed'."

I interrupted again. "I remember the victim's name now, too. Carruthers, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Major Carruthers. He was very particular about the 'Major', too. A nice man, really. But unreason-

able, you know. Of a violent temper. Or so it appeared from the witness's statements. He was found dead, stabbed with a particularly murderous looking paper-knife, at seven o'clock one February morning on the cliff path leading up from the Front to the back of the hotel. At eight-fifteen, Tracy Heritage woke to find a policeman standing by his bed formally charging him with the murder of his fellow guest."

"He protested his innocence at once, didn't he?"

"Both then and subsequently. But the evidence against him was really too damning. Let me remind you of the details.

"At seven o'clock the body of the Major was found by the postman who was on his way to the hotel to deliver the morning letters. He knew the Major by sight and knew him to be a guest at the 'Towers'. But he didn't continue up to the hotel. He went instead to the police station. The inspector returned with him to the hotel, and, before rousing the guests, interviewed the proprietor, showing him the paper-knife he had taken from the body. The horrified proprietor at once recognized it as being the property of Heritage, who, fond of buying rare books, was in the habit of slitting the pages with this same knife. It was known to everyone in the hotel as the property of Heritage. He was continually alarming maiden ladies by leaving it about. They thought it horrid. And it was. Originally an Indian knife, the point had become somewhat blunted, but the edges were still sharp as a razor.

"As soon as the inspector knew for certain that the knife belonged to one of the guests at the hotel he looked grave. Because he already knew something else. And that was that well-defined footsteps led up the cliff path straight from the body to the house. They were unmistakably the track of

the murderer. It was in any case likely that the murder had been committed by someone in the hotel, as few outside would know of the nightly visits the Major paid to his sister at the other side of the town. Or that he was in the habit of returning so late, after several hands of Bridge, that it was the custom of the hotel to leave the door unlocked for him to bolt behind him. The proprietor of the hotel was, as you may imagine, in a fearful state. He saw himself having to rouse the whole hotel, parade them before the inspector and let him question them one by one.

“But the inspector thought differently. After a few questions concerning the staff and the rules of the hotel, he sent for the ‘boots’ and put some further questions to him. From his replies he learned that it was the habit of the ‘boots’ to collect any shoes which required cleaning before he himself went to bed. These shoes he took down to his own quarters. He then locked up for the night (excepting the front door, which was left for the Major), went to bed, and, in the morning, first thing, cleaned all the shoes he had collected the previous night, replacing them outside their respective doors at about seven-thirty next morning. Questioned by the inspector, however, two differences in the ‘boots’ regular routine came to light. The previous night, when he went round to collect his work, he had been somewhat surprised to find no shoes or boots of any description awaiting him outside Tracy Heritage’s door. This was most unusual, as Heritage had one vanity. His feet. They were small. And dapper. And he was most particular as to his shoe-cleaning. He had a large number of pairs, and it was not unusual for him to leave three or four outside his door. This particular evening, however, there was none.

“Later, at the inquest, ‘boots’ said that he had been in

half a mind to knock on the door and inquire. But, reflecting that Heritage was possibly taking a stroll, and knowing that he could get in through the door left unlocked for the Major, he returned instead to his sanctum. Had he knocked at Heritage's door the case would have ended differently. But he didn't. In the morning, however, remembering the missing shoes, and knowing how particular Heritage was about the state of his footwear, he went first thing to get them. Nor was he surprised to find them there. He was, however, distinctly surprised at the state they were in. Prescott Priors is a well-kept model little town and, apart from the path leading up from the Front, singularly free from mud. But Heritage's shoes were not just muddy. They were caked with mud. The sides as well as the soles. Grumbling to himself at the extra work, and wishing the cliff path far enough, 'boots' set to work to clean them. He had, in fact, one of them in his hands when the inspector called him from his work. And that pair of shoes fitted exactly the footsteps which led from the dead Major's body, up through the garden, through the hall of the hotel, to Heritage's door, where the footmarks stopped. That, combined with the paper-knife, was enough for the inspector. He arrested Heritage. Heritage swore, of course, that he had not left his room all night. But he couldn't explain away the shoes. And those shoes would have hanged Heritage if it had not been for his particularly able counsel. He made great play of lack of motive, and—but he never got the jury to see this—the *stupidity* of the whole thing. *Would* any man having just committed a murder, walk in with his muddy shoes and leave them outside his door? He appealed to the jury as men of sense—would *they* have done so? Apparently they would. Or possibly they weren't men of sense. Anyway, they brought in their verdict, and Heri-

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tage's neck was only saved by the King's clemency. I think the Judge had his doubts. They often do."

My companion had been talking so long that I had forgotten my overdue dinner. I was longing to get to it. But one thing was troubling me.

"I still don't see", I said, "one thing. You started by saying you intended to give me the details of a 'perfect murder'. But as far as I can see the whole thing was bungled from start to finish. It was futile. Obvious."

"Obvious that Heritage killed the Major?"

"Exactly."

"But that's just the point!" The little man bubbled with excitement. "Because Heritage *didn't* kill the Major! Heritage was speaking the truth. He slept solidly from half-past ten until eight-fifteen, when he was roused by the inspector's hand on his shoulder. Heritage is an innocent man. The real culprit was never suspected. So it was, you see, the absolutely 'perfect murder'."

I looked at him, puzzled. "You have a theory?"

He nodded.

"You told it to the police?"

"No. I—I'm such an unimportant person, really. They wouldn't have listened to me, you know. But I've thought such a lot about it." He sighed. "It really *was* the 'perfect murder', you know."

Something in his tone, perhaps the way he lingered over the last words, made me suddenly change my opinion of him. He no longer seemed an inoffensive little man. He seemed to have grown suddenly—to have swollen. Swollen until he dominated the whole compartment. I had one more question to ask him, though. And I fear I put it somewhat abruptly.

We had passed Reading, and the idea of arriving in

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London without having had my dinner made me distinctly irritable.

"If Heritage didn't kill the Major, who", I asked, "*did?*"

The little man chuckled. I can hear that chuckle still.

"Someone", he said, "with very small feet."

I looked at him coldly. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Let us suppose," he said, "that among the guests at the hotel was a certain Mr. — We'll call him Mr. X. And that Mr. X, for the most excellent of reasons, wished to get rid of the Major. To get rid of him, too, in such a way that no inconvenience would fall on Mr. X."

"Well?"

"Doesn't the solution leap to your mind even now?"

I shook my head. I really disliked him by this time. Such a bumptious, cocksure, little man. So full of himself. So anxious to air his own theory. So obviously waiting for a pat on the back for his own cleverness. He was quite on the edge of his seat now, leaning forward.

"It was quite simple. He knew the rules of the hotel. He knew at what hour the Major would return. He knew of that door being left open for him. He knew Heritage was safely in his room."

"Well?"

"He changed the shoes."

I leaned forward. "He—what?"

"Having secreted Heritage's paper-knife—I told you Heritage was constantly leaving it about—Mr. X went up to his room, early, with a headache. His room was exactly opposite Heritage's. He waited till every guest in the hotel was in bed. Then, opening his door very carefully, and walking without his slippers, he picked up Heritage's shoes, which lay outside his door—this, remember, was *before* 'boots' had been on his collecting round—put them on,

and went out to interview the Major on the cliff path. *That* was the reason no shoes were found by 'boots' outside Heritage's room. Not because Heritage was out. But because his shoes were. And out on a particularly horrid business, too.

"Mr. X, returning, his business with the Major over, had no particular need not to make a noise, as anyone hearing him would conclude it was merely the Major locking the door behind him. As long as he wasn't seen he was safe. And he wasn't seen. Creeping upstairs, and being careful to leave muddy traces everywhere, he took the shoes *off*, placed them outside the sleeping Heritage's door—where they were found in their muddy state by 'boots' and the inspector next morning—and, regaining the safety of his own room, at once fell into a dreamless sleep. Having been particularly careful to remember to leave Heritage's knife still sticking in the body."

The train was crashing over the points outside Paddington Station by this time and for a moment I couldn't make myself heard. When I did my companion was reaching up to the rack for his case while I at the same time was trying to extract mine from under the seat.

"I still don't see two things," I said.

My companion turned. "Well?"

"Heritage had no motive for killing the Major?"

"Heritage didn't kill the Major."

"I'm prepared to believe that. But what was the other fellow's motive?"

"A very strong one." The little man laughed openly this time. "Mr. X had a somewhat weak chest, you see. And the Major was a fresh air fiend."

"A—*what?*"

"He insisted on always having the window in the smok-

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ing-room open. Mr. X's favourite seat was by that window. And Mr. X, owing to financial trouble he was going through at the moment, had to stay in that hotel for the whole winter. The Major wouldn't listen to reason. He was like that. So it was pneumonia for Mr. X. Or the knife for the Major."

I looked at the little man in horror; he spoke so carelessly.

"You're joking, of course?"

"Not at all. You've no idea how many murders are the result of trifles like that. Quite understandable, I think."

"The man must have been mad."

"Nothing of the kind." He had his hand on the door catch now. "Just a genius, in his own way."

"But the small feet? Where do they come in?"

He was out on the platform by this time. Beckoning a porter. But he turned at my question. As if anxious to instruct me.

"Because", he said, "Heritage had small feet, too. He was vain about them, if you remember. The man that stepped into his shoes that night must have had very small feet. Very small feet indeed."

Another moment and he was gone. But I still sat there, thinking. Oblivious of the bustle around me. Some vague image at the back of my mind was struggling to come forward. But it wouldn't take shape. Suddenly——

I had it! When I had stooped to get my suitcase from under the seat, and while my companion was getting his down from the rack opposite, I had been looking at something. Staring. As one often does when concentrating on something else. And now, in a flash, I realized what it was that had imprinted itself on my brain. His feet!

The feet of my travelling companion. Small, dapper,

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mincing. I was out of the compartment in a moment. But I was too late. For, as I jumped to the platform, the man with the small feet was just stepping into a taxi at the other end. I shouted. But the taxi drove off. So it *was* the "perfect murder". For an innocent man still suffers in his place.

2000

BY
VALENTINE GREGORY



THIRD TIME *UN*-LUCKY

“A lady to see you, sir.” Professor Eldon Harkness glanced up at his butler and made a movement of impatience.

“How often must I tell you that I will see no one except by appointment?”

“Quite so, sir,” murmured Rawlings, rubbing his hands together nervously. “But I ventured in this case, sir . . . the lady appears to be in some distress, sir.”

“What’s that to do with it?” demanded Harkness, throwing down his pen savagely.

“Your duty is to *me*—not to every distressed female who takes it into her silly head to knock at my door. . . . Who is she? What’s she like? What does she want? . . . Oh, show her in,” finished the Professor with a growl.

“Very good, sir,” said Rawlings, acknowledging the curt command with a slight bow. A faint smile flitted over his face as he turned and left the study.

Harkness’s irritation was perhaps excusable. Since eighty-three that morning he had been engaged, without pause, in the preparation of an important paper on certain aspects of biology which he was to read before a learned society the following week.

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It was within a few minutes of one o'clock; he was torn between a desire for food and a determination to complete his task.

And now had come an interruption that threatened alike to postpone the satisfaction of the one and hinder the fulfilment of the other.

There were times when Professor Harkness was inclined to regret his passion for criminology and bemoan the success that had attended so many of his amateur efforts at crime detection.

Although this had won him a measure of public fame, and the grudging respect of Scotland Yard, from which he was human enough to derive some satisfaction, he was guiltily conscious that these interests were inclined to encroach too much upon the time he should devote to the pursuit of pure science.

But he was so constituted that he could not ignore the challenge of an unsolved mystery. He knew his weakness, and in consequence always heard with a kind of pleasing dread Rawlings's announcement of some unknown caller.

Laying down his ancient brier, he heaved his tall, spare frame out of his chair and stood, feet apart, with his back to the fireplace, frowning over horn-rimmed spectacles at the door.

A discreet tap was followed by Rawlings's silent entrance.

"The lady, sir," he said, stepping aside.

Harkness fixed his penetrating gaze on the woman framed in the curtained doorway.

He saw a pale, face set with large, sombre eyes beneath a broad, low brow. The mouth was unnaturally red, and the full lips slightly parted.

The nose was well shaped but perhaps over narrow; and

from the outer nostrils deep lines of grief, worry, or discontent ran to meet the corners of the mouth.

She was well but simply dressed, and had the poise of a lady, which somehow threw into stronger relief the signs of anxiety and distress plainly visible upon her face.

"Will you be seated, madam," said Harkness, at the same time dismissing Rawlings with a nod.

Instead of acting on the invitation, the woman advanced to within a couple of paces of the Professor and looked up into his face.

"Professor Harkness," she said in a rich contralto voice, clasping her well-gloved hands together, "I can't find words to thank you for seeing me, a complete stranger, without either introduction or appointment."

The Professor's hard, lined face softened as he made a slight gesture with his right hand.

"I should feel that my intrusion was unwarranted if I were not so desperately worried," she went on. "I've heard of the wonderful things you've done, and I thought you might be willing to help me."

Her wide eyes looked pleadingly full into his for a moment, and then seemed to flicker aside, as though a little disconcerted by his intent regard.

"Won't you sit down?" urged Harkness setting the example and indicating a chair beside his vast writing-table.

With a graceful movement possible only to a figure perfectly proportioned, his caller seated herself, crossed her knees, and dabbed her eyes with a minute lace handkerchief.

"My name is Carstairs," she said, "Mrs. Norman Carstairs. We occupy a flat in Munster Gardens, where we have resided since our marriage five years ago.

"My husband is on the Stock Exchange, and partner in

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a firm of good standing in the City. Prior to our marriage he had spent several years abroad, being at the time connected with the rubber industry."

"In the East?" asked Harkness.

"Yes, the Straits Settlements," was the reply. "I don't know much about his life in those days, excepting that I understand he was very successful in business, and, as I believe is common in such cases, made one or two enemies as well as many friends.

"But he's always been rather reticent about those times, and I've never bothered him with questions."

"Admirable," murmured Harkness, looking at her with a slightly quizzical expression in his eyes. "That, I believe, is one of the secrets of happy married life."

"What—the husband's reticence?" asked the woman a trifle sharply.

"No, Mrs. Carstairs—the wife's suppression of her natural curiosity," was the smiling reply.

"Oh! yes; I see," returned the woman, looking a little doubtfully at the Professor. Then her face cleared.

"Of course, the best of husbands may have memories they like to keep to themselves, and I don't see why they shouldn't," she said.

"One might, perhaps, say the same of the wives—except, of course, that the best of them never had a past," commented Harkness. "At least, I presume so. I'm a bachelor—at present—so am scarcely qualified to express an opinion on such matters."

The Professor's eyes were fixed upon the woman as he spoke. She met his gaze with a smile in which there was a suggestion of strain. Then, with a sigh, she applied the wisp of lace to her eyes once more.

"But this is by the way," went on Harkness, folding his

arms and leaning back in his chair. "May we come back to the purpose of your call?"

Mrs. Carstairs moved slightly, as though rearranging her thoughts with her attitude. Then she leaned forward.

"About three weeks ago my husband received an anonymous letter. It was delivered at the flat by hand. He opened it, read it, looked a little puzzled, and then tossed it across for me to read.

"I was horrified. I have it here."

Mrs. Carstairs opened her handbag, extracted a soiled white envelope and handed it to the Professor.

Before drawing out the enclosure, Harkness submitted the envelope to a close scrutiny, peering at it through a powerful magnifying glass, and paying special attention to the gum on the flap. Then he inspected the sheet.

This was of common writing-paper, quarto size, lined, and bearing on its top edge traces of adhesive matter, suggesting that it had been torn from a cheap writing pad.

In roughly printed characters, across almost the full width of the sheet, appeared the following message:

SIX YEARS AGO. HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN? IT'S TAKEN ME
THAT LONG TO GET BACK HOME AND FIND YOU. YOU LEFT
ME RUINED. I SHALL LEAVE YOU DEAD. YOU KNOW WHY.
YOU KNOW WHO.

Harkness laid the paper down and looked keenly at Mrs. Carstairs.

"I understand that your husband's reaction to this communication was mystification rather than fear?"

"At the time—yes."

"What precisely do you mean by that, Mrs. Carstairs?" asked Harkness.

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"Well, he was inclined to treat it as a sort of silly practical joke—until the later letters came."

"Later letters?" repeated Harkness, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes. Two others. I have them here."

And Mrs. Carstairs produced a couple of other envelopes from her handbag—each identical in outward appearance with the first.

Harkness placed them on the table before him.

"Go on, Mrs. Carstairs," he said, with a smile. "We'll look at these presently."

"Why, I was saying that at first he seemed to regard it as just nonsense.

" 'Some idiot in the 'House' is trying to pull my leg,' he said.

"But I urged him to take it to the police, reminding him that he was abroad six years ago, and might have made an enemy more vindictive than he was aware of at the time.

"But he only laughed at me—until the second letter came."

"Let's see what that said," suggested Harkness, picking up the top letter of the two. "Is this it?"

Mrs. Carstairs nodded, and Harkness submitted the envelope to the same scrutiny he had bestowed on the first. Then he drew out the enclosure and spread it open before him.

The same roughly-scrawled printed characters were displayed, but the message was different:

YOU ARE ONE WEEK NEARER THE END. IF YOU'RE WISE
YOU'LL SETTLE YOUR AFFAIRS. I'VE WAITED SIX YEARS FOR
THIS—BUT I GIVE YOU THREE WEEKS.

YOU KNOW WHO.

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"Then came this, I suppose?" asked Harkness, picking up the second envelope.

Mrs. Carstairs nodded. The Professor extracted the contents and read the following:

YOU HAVE TWO MORE WEEKS OF LIFE. MAKE THE MOST OF THEM, FOR I SHALL STRIKE SUDDENLY.

YOU KNOW WHO.

"When was this delivered?" asked Harkness.

"A week ago," was the reply. "Since then I've done my utmost to persuade my husband to *do* something, to take *some* precaution, to protect himself in *some* way; but he flatly refuses to go to the police.

"Although I can plainly see it's getting on his nerves, he persists in thinking the writer must be a madman, who's mistaking him for someone else."

"He no longer regards it as a practical joke, then?"

"That I'm sure of, although he tries to laugh it off. I'm certain he's desperately worried, but he won't go to Scotland Yard. So I'm forced to only one conclusion."

"And what is that, Mrs. Carstairs?" asked Harkness.

"That there *was* something in his past that he's concealed from me," was the reply.

"I can't imagine his having done anything discreditable, but isn't it possible that, years ago, he inadvertently injured someone, who has brooded over it since, and now means to have revenge?"

Harkness looked at the woman in silence for a moment.

"Then you don't think there's a woman in it?" he asked suddenly.

Mrs. Carstairs lowered her lashes.

"I hardly know what to think," she murmured. Then she gave the Professor a penetrating look.

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"Doesn't the handwriting tell you anything—as to the sex of the writer, I mean?" she said.

"Not at present," returned Harkness. "But it may—later."

"That sounds impossible," said the woman, smiling faintly.

"Science will admit nothing impossible—except reshaping the past," returned Harkness seriously.

"As to the sex of the writer of these letters, it may be betrayed by something other than the actual handwriting. Sex is more pervasive and penetrative than is generally supposed."

"I'm afraid that's quite beyond me," said Mrs. Carstairs, laughing a little nervously.

With an abrupt gesture, Harkness seemed to dismiss the point. Then he turned the envelopes over idly, and pushed them aside with seeming indifference.

"How were they delivered?" he asked. "Evidently in no case through the post."

"No," replied the woman. "The janitor of the flats found them in the general letter box and brought them up with other correspondence."

"In each case?"

"Why—yes; of course."

"Did you question him about them?"

"I believe my husband did."

Harkness nodded. Then he leaned forward, his arms resting on the table.

"Now tell me, Mrs. Carstairs, why, exactly, have you come to me? I should like to know."

"In the hope that you may be able to discover the writer of those letters and avert a tragedy—if the threats they convey are seriously intended."

"Why didn't you go to Scotland Yard?"

THIRD TIME UN-LUCKY

"Because my husband forbade me—but did not say I was not to consult *you*."

"But did you tell him of your intention to see me?"

"No, I must confess I didn't. I was afraid he might object."

"Well, Mrs. Carstairs," said Harkness, "you've brought me a very interesting problem, and I will do my utmost to find the solution. If the anonymous writer means business, we haven't much time to spare."

Mrs. Carstairs rose gracefully, and held out her hand.

"You've no idea how terribly relieved I feel, now that I've seen you, Professor. I know you'll avert this fearful tragedy that's hanging over my poor husband's head."

"I certainly will, if I can," replied Harkness grimly. "I suppose I can get you on the phone, if necessary?"

"Yes. I'll leave you my card, Professor."

While Mrs. Carstairs searched her handbag, Harkness rang the bell.

"Show Mrs. Carstairs out, Rawlings," he said, when, with rather surprising promptitude, the butler appeared.

"Good-bye, Professor; and thanks again—a thousand times!"

Harkness acknowledged his visitor's smile, and watched her departure with an inscrutable expression on his face. Then he sat down again, and drew the telephone directory towards him.

A few minutes later he rang up a City number.

"Mr. Carstairs in?" he asked.

"Mr. Carstairs is at lunch," came the reply, in a toneless feminine voice.

"When will he be in?"

"I'm unable to say."

"Will you give him a message?"

"Mr. Carstairs is out."

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"Listen, young woman," said Harkness gruffly. "You've already told me Mr. Carstairs is out. Don't take too much advantage of his absence, but pay attention."

"This is Professor Harkness speaking. . . . Yes. . . . Ask Mr. Carstairs to ring me the instant he comes in. Got that? . . . Right. And don't forget—or you may rue it!"

Harkness hung up with a muttered exclamation of impatience. Then he picked up the three anonymous letters.

At 3.30 the Professor's telephone buzzed.

"Hello?"

"Is that Professor Harkness? This is Carstairs speaking. I understand you rang me up."

"Yes. Could you possibly come over to see me? . . . To-day. This afternoon. The sooner the better."

"I've heard of you, Professor, of course; but haven't had the pleasure of meeting you. Is it anything I can do for you?"

"On the contrary. It's something I may be able to do for you."

"I don't quite understand."

"I had a visit from your wife this morning."

"Did you, begad!" came the reply in a surprised tone. "All right. What's your address?"

Harkness gave it.

"I'll be with you within half an hour."

Carstairs was as good as his word. It was on the stroke of four when Rawlings made his usual discreet appearance and announced the caller.

"Mr. Carstairs, sir."

"Come in. Glad to see you, Mr. Carstairs. Take that armchair. Rawlings, the whisky and soda."

"No, thanks," exclaimed the visitor. "Too early for me."

known swine is waiting to take me for a ride or put me on the spot, as the saying goes. Dash it all, what *can* I do?"

Harkness stood up, and looked down seriously at his visitor.

"While hoping for the best," he said, "I should, if I were you, take the advice contained in the second letter, and put your affairs in order. You have your wife to consider."

"You really think that?" asked Carstairs, rising and standing a little unsteadily. "Well, I've nothing to do in that respect. My affairs *are* in order, and my wife is thoroughly protected. I've no worry on that score.

"Every bean I possess goes to her, and my insurance is not a small one. Look here, Professor, if I may, I'll change my mind about that whisky and soda. Upon my soul, I could do with a spot. I feel a bit shaken."

"Naturally," returned Harkness. "Perhaps you'll help yourself." And he indicated the decanter and siphon standing on a side table.

"Thanks," said Carstairs, proceeding to help himself generously.

"Well, what's the next step?" he asked, when he had tossed off his drink.

"I shall pursue a certain line of inquiry," replied Harkness. "But all I can recommend you to do is to take the utmost care during the next few days. Suspect everyone—*everyone*," he repeated impressively.

"Avoid isolation. I should even be inclined to suggest your going away somewhere for a fortnight, without telling a soul when and where you are going—unless you cared to take *me* into your confidence."

"But that's utterly impossible," replied Carstairs impatiently. "I'm handling some big business at the moment that needs all my attention. I couldn't get away."

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"Well," said Harkness, with an undisguised sigh, "I must leave that to you."

A few minutes later Carstairs took his departure, Harkness having promised to get in touch with him should any new development arise from his line of inquiry.

At five o'clock Rawlings brought the Professor his afternoon tea and the three rich, sweet, cream-stuffed pastries which the man of science, in defiance of all dietetic wisdom, ate daily with the gusto of a schoolboy.

"Would you like an evening out, Rawlings?" asked the master, plunging his teeth into a large cream bun.

"Not particularly, sir, thank you, sir. I was hoping to finish Robertson's *Short History of Morals* this evening," replied Rawlings. "Moreover, sir, there's a broadcast of Stravinsky's music at eight o'clock, which I was looking forward. . . ."

"Well, you must miss your morals and your music for once," interrupted the scientist. "I want you to deliver this letter to Mrs. Carstairs—in person, if possible; and while you're there, make friends with the janitor of the flats."

"Make *friends* with him, sir?"

"Yes. Take him out. Get him tight, if you can do so without getting tight yourself; and extract from him all the information you can about the Carstairs—who their visitors are; what sort of life they lead; and any other domestic details. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," returned Rawlings a little hesitatingly. "But, if I may be allowed to say so, sir, it savours somewhat of espionage."

"Of course it does, man! Because that's exactly what it is," retorted Harkness impatiently. "And don't pretend you won't like doing it, you old hypocrite—because I know better."

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"But, sir——" expostulated the butler.

"Listen, Rawlings," interrupted Harkness gravely. "I'm trying to save a man's life, and what I'm asking you to do is an essential part of my plan. Here's a pound for your expenses; and take care there's no change."

"In that case, sir," said Rawlings, picking up the note and speaking more cheerfully, "in the cause of humanity, I shall be only too glad to carry out your instructions."

Harkness leaned back in his chair and looked up at the butler with a grin.

"Rawlings," he said, "you're priceless."

"I'm happy to be of value to you, sir."

"I believe you are. Well, that'll be all. I shall be dining out this evening."

Harkness did not return to his flat until a little past midnight.

Rawlings, rather flushed, was asleep in the entrance lounge, but struggled to his feet upon his master's appearance.

"Rawlings, I'm afraid you've been drinking," said the Professor, a glint of amusement in his keen grey eyes.

"Quite so, sir," admitted the man, a trifle thickly, taking his master's coat and hat.

"Come into the study, and tell me all about it," said the latter, leading the way.

"You can sit down," he added, seeing that the butler was inclined to sway as he stood before the writing-table.

Rawlings dropped heavily into the nearest chair.

"I handed your letter to the lady—in person," he began.

"She stated there was no reply."

"Was she alone?"

"So far as I know, sir. It's a service flat. The lady opened the door herself, and I saw no sign of a maid."

"Did you notice anything particular?"

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"Only that there was some luggage in the hall, sir. A lady's dressing-case and a suitcase. Also, I thought she seemed a little agitated, sir."

"What gave you that impression?"

"The way she tore your letter open, sir."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir. So I retired and renewed my acquaintance with the housekeeper, with whom I'd passed the time of day on my way up.

"I found him an agreeable person—not too well read, sir, but intelligent for a man of his class. So I invited him to join me in a glass."

"And he did?"

"He did, indeed, sir. He proved highly efficient in that respect, sir. He didn't start singing until about ten minutes before closing time."

"By then, I hope . . ." interrupted Harkness.

"By then, sir," went on Rawlings, "I had extracted from him as much data as possible relating to the Carstairs."

"And what did that amount to?" demanded the Professor.

"Nothing to the discredit of the parties, so far as I could judge, sir."

"No male visitors during the husband's absence, eh?"

"Oh, no, sir; he didn't breathe a word of scandal. Certainly, he did say that Mr. Carstairs sometimes came home rather fresh.

"But as he was well on the way to the same condition himself when he made the accusation, I took it for what it was worth."

"No mention of quarrels?"

"No, sir. He seemed to think highly of the lady, but remarked that she hadn't seemed quite herself the last two

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or three weeks—more especially since he'd found two rather queerly addressed envelopes in the general box and taken them up to the flat.

“ ‘Not the sort of letters you'd expect a gent to receive,’ he said.

“ ‘How do you know?’ I asked. ‘You didn't steam them open, did you?’

“Then he asked me what I thought he was, and explained that he'd referred to the outsides—the envelopes.

“ ‘If ever I've seen blackmailing letters,’ he said, ‘it was them two. Disguised 'andwritin'—like a kid trying to print,’ he said. ‘And no stamps on 'em.’

“That was the point that seemed to annoy him most, sir. Cheating the revenue, he said it was, and remarked that he'd like to catch the bloke what shoved them in the letter-box. I'm giving you *his* language, sir. I shouldn't like you to think that I . . .”

“Not for a moment,” Harkness assured him. “But are you quite sure he referred to only *two* of such letters?”

“That I'll swear, sir. He was emphatic on that point. Not that I questioned him about it, not seeing any significance in the number.”

“ ‘Since them two letters come addressed to her old pot-an'-pan,’ he said, sir, ‘she some'ow ain't bin the same woman. Not by a long chalk.’

“Of course, I gathered what he meant, sir. Then he went on to say that, anyhow, she keeps up her bridge do's—meaning parties, I presume, sir.”

“Ah; bridge parties,” repeated Harkness.

“Yes, sir. Three afternoons per week. And a nice lot of old hens she has there, he said. Hard-faced Janes was another of his phrases, sir.

“Moreover, he expressed the view that, judging by their

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clocks, they'd tear out the teeth of a dead corpse for the sake of the gold stopping.

"But not having seen the ladies, sir, I'm unable to confirm his opinion."

"I think you've done remarkably well, Rawlings," said Harkness, hiding a smile. "And now you'd better go to bed—unless you can recall anything else of importance?"

"Well, sir, I should like to say, in justice to myself, that I beat him at darts, sir!"

"Good man!" cried Harkness, rising. "Now, off you go. Good night."

"Good night, sir," returned Rawlings, slightly marring the dignity of his exit by tripping over a corner of the rug.

The following morning Harkness rang up Carstairs at the latter's office in the City.

"Any further developments?" asked the Professor.

"No," came the reply; "except that my wife, feeling unable to stand the suspense any longer, took it into her head last night to go down to stay with friends who have a place in Sussex. I hope it'll do her good. She's been looking a bit peaky lately."

"Quite," agreed Harkness. "Rather a sudden decision, wasn't it?"

"Well, it was—rather. But she's a bit temperamental, you see; although, mind you, she's the best little woman in the world."

"Of course," returned Harkness. "But what about yourself? You'll surely not be staying at the flat alone?"

"Rather not! She made me promise to put up at an hotel in town while she's away, so I agreed. I've booked a room at the Royant. You can get me there any evening, if you want to. I suppose you've nothing to tell *me*?"

"Not yet," replied the Professor. "Probably, a little later

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on, I shall have some surprising information for you. Meanwhile, I mustn't detain you. You'll let me know if you change your plans—decide to go out of town, or anything—won't you?"

"Of course. But I'm not likely to do that. Good-bye, Professor."

The whole of the following day, Harkness was busy with his own affairs. Now and then he gave some thought to the Carstairs problem, only to realize his helplessness to avert a tragedy, if one really was impending.

Although he had formed a very definite theory as regards the anonymous letters, and took a serious view of their menaces, it was, after all, no more than a theory.

Besides, he was under the additional handicap of being an unofficial investigator, barred, on that account, from taking certain precautionary steps that his suspicions warranted, but the lack of tangible evidence forbade.

Towards evening, however, he was stirred into activity. There came a ring from Carstairs.

"That you, Professor?"

The voice sounded cheerful but a little excited.

"I've had a ring from the wife. She's begged me to go down to her, to-night. Says she can't stand the suspense any longer. Hates to think of me alone in town.

"I rather demurred, don't you know; but she said that's the only way she can assure herself of my safety. So, as she seemed in rather a ghastly state of nerves, I promised. I shall be leaving town immediately after dinner."

"I see," replied Harkness. "What time will that be?"

"Oh, nine-ish, I should say. It's barely a couple of hours' run in the car."

"So you're motoring down?"

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"Yes; Dorothy's asked me to use the sports car. She thinks she might run up with me to-morrow, and prefers the open bus."

"You've no objection to giving me your address?" said Harkness. "One never knows—I might want to get in touch with you before to-morrow morning. Is there a phone in the house you're going to?"

"Yes; Pulborough double-seven double-seven. The people are distant cousins of my wife. The Marchmonts. Quite a nice crowd."

"I know the Pulborough neighbourhood fairly well," said Harkness. "Charming district. What did you say was the name of the house?"

"The Beech Knoll. It's close to Fittleworth. You know the old inn there, I dare say."

"Rather!" returned Harkness with enthusiasm. "I've fished near by. Well, a safe and pleasant run."

"Thanks. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," repeated Harkness as he hung up the receiver. Then he folded and slipped into his pocket the sheet of paper on which, during the conversation, he had jotted down a few notes, and rang for Rawlings.

"Look up the trains for Pulborough," he said, glancing at his watch. It said six o'clock.

Professor Harkness alighted at Pulborough Station within a few minutes of half-past nine.

It is doubtful whether his most intimate friend would have recognized him, because this was one of the very rare occasions on which he had resorted to disguise.

An ancient suit of shabby, baggy tweeds hung loosely on his spare frame; one of his old golfing caps covered his

head; and his chin was partly concealed by a short, iron-grey beard.

With pipe in mouth and a stout ground ash walking-stick in his hand, he resembled one of the nondescripts met with occasionally on the country roads of England, and who, as they pass, leave one guessing whether they are eccentric peers, queer writers or artists, or genuine down-and-outs who have seen better days.

It was a cloudless summer's evening, and, thanks to daylight saving, was comparatively light. The sun had set only an hour before, and the west was still flushed with its dying glow.

The Professor made his way to the inn outside the station and regaled himself with a pint of ale and a crust of bread and cheese.

He knew his way to Fittleworth, but was ignorant of the exact whereabouts of Beech Knoll. However, a few casual inquiries of his fellow-customers, framed in such a way as to arouse no suspicion in the inherently suspicious rustic mind, elicited the information he sought.

At ten o'clock, when the house closed, he left the inn, passed under the railway bridge and took the westward road to Fittleworth.

He calculated that Carstairs was by now about an hour on his way—probably approaching Horsham. He assumed that the stockbroker would follow the Billingshurst and Pulborough route, and turn into the road he was then traversing at about eleven o'clock.

Concluding, therefore, that he had about an hour at his disposal, he threw his shoulders back, lengthened his stride and swung easily on his way to Fittleworth.

Rather less than an hour's brisk walking brought him to the centre of the village.

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By this time darkness had fallen. There was no moon and only a few dim lights showed in the upper windows of the cottages he passed. But stars shone brightly in the deep purple sky, affording light enough for the purpose he had in view.

Shortly after passing the church, he turned up a narrow, sandy lane, and came presently to a pair of white carriage gates. Looking closely, he was able to make out the name painted on the top bars. It was Beech Knoll.

A drive wound between trees to the house he could see standing beyond a lawn, about fifty yards from the road.

The lower windows were brightly lighted, and now and again he saw passing figures silhouetted against the glare. The music of a gramophone or radio floated out on the still night air, but otherwise complete silence brooded over the spot.

Satisfied with what he had seen, Harkness was about to turn and retrace his steps to the main road, intending to await, on the corner, the stockbroker's arrival, when he heard the sound of voices approaching from the house.

He stepped quickly into the dense shadow of the hedge in which the gates were set. A moment or two later the figures of a man and a woman reached and stood by the gate.

"I can't understand you, Dolly," said a man's pleasing tenor voice.

"Why on earth did you ask him to come down? We've few enough chances of being alone as it is; and yet, as soon as we've an opportunity of being on our own, you spoil it. It makes me wonder whether you really do love me."

"You silly boy!" replied the woman, whose voice Harkness instantly recognized. "That's exactly why I *have* sent for him—because I love you more than anything on earth,

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more than life itself, more than my own immortal soul!"

"Darling!" exclaimed the man. "I believe you, with my whole heart. But, even then, I can't make out why you should have asked him to come down to-night—of all nights."

"It was a gesture—call it a discreet move, if you like. But something tells me he'll not come."

"But you told me he said he would!"

"I know. But I've a feeling that something may happen to prevent him."

"But surely he'd have phoned if he'd changed his mind?"

"Oh, I don't know," returned the woman lightly. "You know what some men are. But come, let's go in, Mostyn. I feel a little shivery."

Without further speech, the pair turned from the gate, and Harkness, peering over the hedge, watched them for a moment as they sauntered towards the house.

Then he swung away from the hedge and hurried at his fastest down the lane.

"You fool!" he muttered to himself. "You utter fool!"

It was three o'clock the following morning before Harkness got back to his flat.

With some difficulty he had finally succeeded in hiring a car at Pulborough to bring him up to town. He had dozed a little on the way, but was glad to get to bed and sleep soundly until Rawlings, entering with the tea, aroused him at eight o'clock.

At nine, the Professor passed into his study, and a few minutes later there came a ring on the phone.

"That you, Professor? Detective-Inspector Garton speaking."

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"Good morning, Garton. What's biting you so early?"

"I'm on a queer case. A man found dead in his flat by the janitor early this morning."

"Murder?" asked Harkness.

"That's what I'd like to know," returned the detective.

"I'm on the spot now. P'raps you'd like to run over?"

"What address?"

"Munster Gardens."

"Munster Gardens!" repeated Harkness slowly. Then he spoke eagerly, urgently.

"Is it No. 1040?"

"How the devil did you know?" came Garton's astonished voice.

"Never mind that—just now. I'm coming over—at once."

Harkness hung up, and in five minutes was speeding across the Park in a taxi.

A uniformed constable stood in the entrance of the block of flats where the Carstairs had their suite.

Harkness raced up the stairs to the second floor. On the landing, two plain clothes men appeared to be guarding a door.

"Professor Harkness?" asked one, as the scientist approached.

Harkness nodded.

"Inspector Garton's expecting you, sir," said the man, opening the door.

Harkness passed inside and found himself in a well-furnished entrance hall. On the floor, in about the centre of the apartment, lay the figure of a man, the upper part covered with a travelling rug.

Detective-Inspector Garton, who, with his hands clasped behind his back, stood gazing out of the window opening

on to the well of the building, swung round as Harkness entered.

"Ah, Professor!" he cried, stepping forward. "First of all, I want to know how you knew this address."

"That can wait, Garton," replied Harkness gravely. "This, I fear, is a man named Carstairs."

Garton stared at the scientist with wide eyes and open mouth.

"Don't talk," added Harkness. "Let me get my own impressions first."

He dropped on one knee and gently uncovered the head of the dead man.

The face was distorted and discoloured. Stamped upon it there was an expression of mingled anger, agony and fear.

Down the centre of the forehead, from where the hair started to within an inch of the top of the nose, was a deep scratch.

Harkness took a magnifying glass from his pocket and closely examined the mark. Then he peered into the staring eyes, and, parting the twisted lips, found that the discoloured tongue was partly bitten through by the clenched teeth.

With a slight shudder, the scientist drew the rug over the dead man again and rose to his feet.

Silencing Garton with a gesture, he stood beside the corpse and looked slowly round the hall.

On a chair stood a suitcase. Beside it lay a pair of pigskin gloves. Over the back of the chair hung a leather motoring coat.

"He was either going or coming, from the looks of it," observed Garton, who had followed the direction of the Professor's gaze.

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Harkness made no reply, but allowed his glance to wander here and there about the room. Then he stepped across to the fireplace, in front of which stood a Japanese screen.

In the hearth lay a tweed cap, of similar material to that of the suit of plus-fours the dead man was wearing.

Reaching down, Harkness very carefully picked up the cap with his gloved right hand. As he did so, there came a faint rattle on the tiles of the hearth.

Pushing the screen aside, he sank to his knees and searched around. Then, with a smothered exclamation, he drew the handkerchief from his breast pocket, dropped it over a small object, and transferred the two to his pocket.

"Have a look at that cap," he said, rising. "While I look round."

The detective took the article, smelled it, turned it inside out, read the maker's name, and then, holding it well away from him, appeared to admire its shape.

"A nice cap," he threw over his shoulder at Harkness, who was examining a glass specimen case fixed to the wall beside the fireplace.

The Professor turned, and walked over to the detective.

"The cap of death," he said, taking the article from the puzzled officer's hand.

"Now, I'd like to help you in the case, Garton," he smiled; "but if you want me to assist you, I must do so in my own way."

"Well, I don't mind admitting it's paid me in the past," laughed the detective.

"So it will in the present," Harkness assured him. "I don't wish to interfere in the routine work. Let that go on as usual."

"But I want you to get in touch, by phone, with the dead

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man's wife. She's staying at a house called Beech Knoll, Fittleworth, near Pulborough."

"We should have to do that in any case," returned Garton, with an official air.

"I know," agreed Harkness. "But do it now. There's the phone. It's a toll call. Pulborough double-seven double-seven."

Garton picked up the receiver, dialed for toll and gave the number.

"Can I speak to Mrs. Carstairs?" he asked, after waiting a few moments.

"Right!"

"They're calling her," he whispered aside to Harkness.

"That Mrs. Carstairs? . . . Good. This is Detective-Inspector Garton, of Scotland Yard. I'm sorry to say your husband's met with a very serious accident. . . ."

"Let me take the phone now," whispered Harkness, elbowing Garton aside.

"Mrs. Carstairs, this is Professor Harkness speaking also. Yes, it's more serious than the inspector has told you.

"Now, it's imperative that you should come up to town to-day. Can you do that? . . . No; not to your flat, or to Scotland Yard, but to my place. . . ."

"Why? Oh, I think it will be more convenient for all concerned. Can you arrange to arrive at eight o'clock? . . . Very well.

"Er—there's just one other suggestion. Persuade Mr. Mostyn Marchmont to accompany you, if you can. . . ."

"You don't understand? Well, I can't very well explain over the phone. But I strongly advise it. . . . In his interests. . . . That's right. Yes; eight o'clock precisely. Straight to my flat, please. The police are at yours. Good-bye."

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"Who the devil's Mr. Mostyn Marchmont?" demanded Garton as Harkness hung up.

"You'll know—this evening. Now, I must be off. You'd better arrive at ten to eight at my place, with a couple of men—in case of need. Good-bye for the present."

At eight o'clock to the minute the same evening Rawlings entered the study to announce Mrs. Carstairs and Mr. Marchmont.

Harkness rose, but did not advance to greet his visitors.

"I'm glad you're punctual, Mrs. Carstairs," he said. "Please sit down."

Then he turned to the man.

"We've not met before, Mr. Marchmont; but, knowing the deep interest you take in this lady, I thought it advisable for you to be present at this consultation."

The young man—for he looked barely thirty—flushed at the Professor's words, and seemed for a moment at a loss.

"I—I—er——" he stammered, and then took refuge in silence.

"Won't you sit down?" invited Harkness. Then he addressed the butler, who meanwhile had waited by the door.

"Rawlings, request Detective-Inspector Garton to step this way."

Mrs. Carstairs, looking pale and strained, moved uneasily.

"Professor Harkness," she said in her low voice, "I'm naturally terribly anxious to know what has happened to my husband. . . ."

"Your husband, Mrs. Carstairs," replied Harkness impressively, "is—dead."

At that moment Inspector Garton entered the room, bowed to the visitors, and took a seat near the door.

Marchmont had started violently at the Professor's words, and looked from him to the woman, as though astonished.

Mrs. Carstairs pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and then looked across at Harkness.

"Since the receipt of those wretched threatening letters I've been more or less prepared for this, as you'll understand, Professor. Yet, I feel almost too stunned for emotion. How I wish he'd gone to Scotland Yard, as I begged of him!"

Harkness merely glanced at her. Then he opened a drawer and took from it the three letters to which she had referred..

"For the information of Inspector Garton, and for your enlightenment, Mr. Marchmont, I will briefly relate the tragic story of Mr. Carstairs's untimely death," began Harkness, looking from one to the other of his auditors.

"A few days ago," he went on, "Mrs. Carstairs called upon me. She was a stranger, but had heard of certain successes I have had in the detection of crime.

"She informed me that her husband had received three anonymous letters, threatening his life. I have them here."

Harkness held up the three envelopes and replaced them on his desk.

"These letters, she stated, had been delivered by some mysterious hand at the block of flats where she resided with her husband, and had been brought up to their suite with others, ordinary correspondence, by the housekeeper.

"The problem she presented to me was twofold: first, to discover the identity of the writer of the letters, and, second, to guard her husband against the danger that threatened him."

Harkness paused, and looked directly at Mrs. Carstairs.

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Then he went on again, speaking slowly and impressively.

"The first part of the problem I have solved. In the second, I have unfortunately failed. The criminal was too ingenious for me. Consequently, a fine gentleman, in the prime of life, has been done to death by a ruthless assassin."

Again Harkness paused, and his three auditors moved uneasily.

"Mrs. Carstairs and I", resumed the Professor, "discussed the probable sex of the writer of the letters. At the time, I was in doubt. Now I know. It was a woman."

Mrs. Carstairs flushed.

"Ah!" she said hoarsely; "then my suspicions were justified. He'd had an affair when he was abroad—more serious than . . ."

"Please do not interrupt, Mrs. Carstairs," said Harkness sternly. "I have a good deal more to say."

"The sex of the writer of the letters was betrayed by traces of lip rouge on the gum of the envelope flaps. Chemical analysis has proved that."

"Of course, I do not exclude the possibility of there having been two in the conspiracy—a man and a woman—and that the woman may have sealed up the letters the man wrote. But, for certain reasons, I am perfectly satisfied that the murderess acted secretly, and alone."

Harkness had been watching Marchmont as he spoke, and saw him steal a furtive glance at the woman seated beside him.

"Now, it may seem strange to you, but only two of the letters were delivered in the manner described by Mrs. Carstairs. The third was introduced into the flat by some other method."

"My opinion is, that the writer herself placed the third

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letter amongst the general correspondence on the day it was received and opened by the dead man.

"Three is often credited with being a fortunate number. In this instance, however, it proved unlucky!

"I am fully aware of the extreme gravity of the charge I am about to make. Nevertheless, I say with absolute conviction that the woman who wrote and effected the delivery of the letters was—Mrs. Carstairs!"

With an incoherent exclamation, the widow sprang to her feet.

"How *dare* you suggest such a thing?" she said hoarsely. "You lie! You must be a madman—or a fool.

"I'll hold you to account for your vile accusation. You shall hear from my solicitors. Come, Mostyn," she went on in a broken voice, turning to Marchmont, "take me away, please."

"I refuse to listen to another word from this precious Professor—Professor indeed!" she added, laughing discordantly. "A fine Professor, I must say!"

Taking the young man's arm, she turned towards the door. But, at a sign from Harkness, Garton rose and confronted the pair.

"I'm afraid you can't leave—just yet—ma'am," said the detective. "Not until Professor Harkness has completed his statement."

"What is this?" demanded the woman. "Am I under arrest? If so where is your warrant? I demand to see it!"

"All in good time, ma'am," replied Garton. "You'd best sit down—quietly."

Mrs. Carstairs looked for a moment at the inspector with horror in her eyes. Then she dropped back into her chair and buried her face in her shaking hands, sobbing convulsively.

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With an expression on his face difficult to analyse, Marchmont drew his chair a few inches farther from the woman's, and sat down again slowly.

"Mrs. Carstairs came to me", resumed Harkness, after a few moments of painful silence, "to establish a sort of alibi for the crime she contemplated. She desired to be free of her husband. She had formed another attachment. Her affections were engaged elsewhere.

"She did not desire divorce, because that would have deprived her of the comfortable fortune she knew her husband intended to leave her. So she decided on murder, whereby she would be able to gratify both her passion and her greed."

Mrs. Carstairs looked up at the Professor for an instant with a face which terror had already made ghastly. Then, with a shudder, she resumed her former attitude.

"The weapon chosen by the murderess was this."

As he spoke, Harkness took from an open drawer at his side a small, dark, narrow object about an inch and a half long, and held it up between his fingers.

"This," he said, "is a poisoned arrow head. It was taken from a specimen case in the flat and removed from its shaft.

"It is charged with poison of the deadliest description, capable of inflicting a horrible and agonizing death in a few minutes. It is one of several similar objects which, I presume, Mr. Carstairs brought home with him amongst other curiosities from the East.

"Before Mrs. Carstairs left the flat to stay with her friends in Sussex, she very ingeniously fixed the poisoned barb in the peak of her husband's golfing cap, so that it was concealed between the stiffening of the peak and the cloth covering the under part.

Excellent story 26
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BY
VAN HARRISON

★

PAYMENT IN ADVANCE

Just before the War, the Strand shop of Messrs. Dover & Peel, the noted retail jewellers, was burgled. The "job" bore all the signs of expert work, and obviously had been carefully planned. First intimation of the daring robbery was given by the policeman on beat. Finding the front door of the shop ajar, he flashed his lantern and entered.

The night watchman, stunned and bound, was lying behind the counter; and the safe, which was in a room behind the shop, was open. The floor was littered with business papers and empty jewellery boxes, and it is hardly necessary to add that nothing of convertible value remained.

Freeing the watchman, the constable brought him to dazed consciousness, and then telephoned a report to the divisional station. Detective-inspector Welland was sent from Scotland Yard, and accompanying him as assistant was Detective-constable Bryson.

The latter was a young man recently transferred to the C.I.D. from the uniformed branch of the Metropolitan Police, and was a plump, round faced youngster, with

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innocent-looking brown eyes, genial manner, and disarming smile.

In fact, his appearance was totally unlike the popular conception of a C.I.D. man and in marked contrast with his superior's, which was that of the typical old-time detective.

Tall, stout, red-complexioned—with moustache ends waxed and twisted into needle points, barking staccato voice, and dressed in the inevitable bowler hat and blue serge of the pre-War plain-clothes man—Inspector Stanley Welland could never have been mistaken for anything but a policeman.

When they arrived at the premises of Dover & Peel, the night watchman was lying back in a chair and being questioned by a uniformed sergeant from the division.

Inspector Welland interrupted curtly:

“All right, Sergeant, I’m on this job! Now, me man,” he added to the watchman, “let’s hear what happened.”

“I don’t rightly know, sir,” came the slow reply. “Last I remember was sitting in this ’ere chair; something ’it me on the back of the ’ead; and then I woke up to see the bobby standing over me——”

“Then you saw nothing of the fellow who slugged you?”

“No; not a peep. I just felt a clout on the ’ead, like I said, and——”

“Were you still in the chair when you came to?”

“No; I was behind the counter, trussed like a perishing fowl and with a bump on the back of me ’ead like—but feel for yourself, sir.”

Welland felt. “Mm—mm, quite a crack you got,” he agreed. “Is that all you can tell us?”

“That’s all.”

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"You heard no noise before you were slugged?"

"Not a sound."

The inspector regarded him intently. "Having forty winks, eh?" he accused.

"No, sir; on me Davy I wasn't! Wide awake I was, and just thinking about 'aving a bite o' supper."

"What time was that?"

"A few minutes gone two o'clock."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I'd just looked at me watch as I allus has a snack about two."

"Look here, m' man," barked the inspector. "This shop is fitted with steel grids outside all windows; the doors, front and back, 'ud give an elephant a headache forcing 'em, and there's burglar alarms on both."

"You know all that as well as I do, and yet have the nerve to tell me you were wide awake; that entry was made without you hearing a sound."

"Now, come on, let's have the truth—or you may find yourself suspected of being an accessory."

"I've told the truth," answered the watchman sulkily, "and it's no use you trying to make out I let the feller in, though 'ow 'e managed it without me 'earing is a fair corker."

"I can tell you that," interposed a voice from the back of the shop. Detective-constable Bryson, who had been missing for some minutes, walked up to the group.

"Oh, *you* can, can you?" snorted the inspector. "Then hurry up and tell us." It was plain that he did not relish being told anything by an inferior, and in fact doubted the possibility. Bryson's chubby face creased into an amiable grin.

"Through the cellar, Inspector," he explained, and

added to the watchman: "Who's in the next-door shop that way?" He pointed to the wall on his right.

"It's been empty two months or more."

"Ah! easy to——"

"What've you found, Bryson?" interrupted the inspector.

"A hole in the partition wall between the next cellar and this. The bricks have been pulled out. Also, the door at the top of the cellar steps is just behind this office and open."

"It was never locked," informed the watchman. "What need, seeing as 'ow there's no other way into the cellar?"

"Except through the wall," grunted Welland. "I'll have a look in a minute, but it seems clear that the thief got into the empty shop—make a note to find if it's let, and to whom, Bryson!—pulled out a few bricks, walked easy as you please up the steps, sneaked behind and knocked you out. Simple, eh?"

"One thing is funny, though," remarked Bryson thoughtfully.

"What's that?" inquired Welland.

"Why did he go out of *this* shop door and *leave it open*? If he'd closed it after him, or gone out through the empty shop next door, the burglary wouldn't have been known until morning and he'd have had that much more time to get clear."

"Nervy at the last minute, I expect," said Welland, nonchalantly. "The cleverest of 'em generally makes *one* mistake—which is as well for us."

He knelt beside the safe and examined it closely. After a few minutes he rose, smiling grim satisfaction.

"Clever job," he grunted. "So clever, that only two men in London could ha' done it. That's the best o' smart professional crooks; always leave their trade-marks on

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their work." He turned to address the uniformed sergeant.

"Lock this room, Sergeant," he ordered. "Leave two men on guard, and allow nobody in until you hear from me. Understand? *Nobody!* Not even the owners! Come on, Bryson, we've got to hurry. . . ."

Three days later, they were still "hurrying", and, as Inspector Welland wrathfully admitted, "getting nowhere". The stolen property, mostly diamonds, was valued by Mr. Peel, the managing director, at fifteen thousand pounds, and the only clue Welland had was his original opinion based on the expert method of safe-breaking.

His two suspects were John Muller and Edward Davies, both professional criminals and specialists in the art of cracking safes.

Unfortunately, neither was to be found in his known and usual haunts, but the following day the Manchester police reported Davies to be staying at a local hotel, and since it was verified that he had been there every night for more than a week, his alibi was irrefutable. Welland grinned sourly when he received the news, and concentrated on finding the remaining suspect.

"I had an idea from the start it'd be Muller," he confided to Bryson. "Brainiest criminal in Europe, that feller, and knows more about locks than the safe-makers themselves.

"Served his time in the business, he did; 's wonderful how many first-class burglars have been first-class mechanics.

"Anyway, we know he's hiding somewhere in town, and with half the C.I.D. watching for him it's only a matter of time before he's pinched."

Bryson was not so confident of his superior's rather vague reasoning. There were dozens of men in London capable

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of opening that old-fashioned safe, and to single out one on the flimsy evidence of his manner of working seemed risky.

"If it *was* Muller", he argued, "he can't be such a brainy bird to go out and leave that door open."

"Pah! You've got that door on the brain. Leaving it ajar was just an oversight through excitement. It was Muller all right; I've been too long at this game not to recognize tip-top work when I see it.

"No 'soup' or crowbars used on *that* safe; it was neatly opened by someone who knew how. Only two men in London can do a job like that—and, since Davies is out of the running, I'll stake all Lombard Street to a China orange it was Muller."

Less than two hours later Welland's uncertain theory became, in his opinion, proved fact. A letter addressed to him was delivered at Scotland Yard by the afternoon post, giving the first definite line to the robbery.

It was the type of communication familiar to the police—a dirty piece of paper in a grimy envelope, with both address and contents inscribed in malformed block capitals so as to provide no clue to handwriting.

Bryson had just come in from a fruitless quest in the East End and was glumly reporting his lack of success in the inspector's room when the letter was brought up. Welland glanced carelessly at the envelope.

"Somebody squealing," he remarked. "There's as much honour among thieves as water in the Sahara."

Bryson nodded. Even during the short time he had been at the Yard, he had seen that much of the police information came from unknown sources—from some rogue with a grudge against another rogue; a woman in a fit of pique against her man.

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Sometimes it was valuable knowledge, often useless or untrue; always its motive was sordid, underhand, and vile as crime itself.

The inspector slit open the envelope, read the brief message it contained, and swore softly in surprise. He read it again, examined it carefully, turned it over, and finally tossed the scrap of paper across to his assistant.

"Look at that," he cried delightedly, and added with a chuckle, "Now who's right, young feller? Always an old horse for a rough road."

The message was undated, unsigned, and brief:

"Jack Muller and Slimy Steve did that Strand job."

"Who is 'Slimy Steve'? asked Bryson.

"Spineless little rat, sneak-thief, and hanger-on," said Welland, whose knowledge of London's underworld was encyclopædic. "If he was on this job, it would be just as look-out for Muller. Anyway, we're going now to pay Slimy a call, so if we have any luck you'll see him soon."

"Where does he live?"

"Shadwell way, in a dirty shack on a broken-down old jetty overhanging the river. He's thought to do a bit of dope smuggling from ships, and the river police have had their eyes on him for months."

The now demolished Northey's Jetty used to jut out over the Thames from between two big warehouses, and even before the War had been disused for years.

Its weed-hung piles were rotten with age and rush of endless tides, the single-track railway line rusted and grass-grown, and its planks loose, weather-beaten and dangerous to strange feet.

At the river end stood a two-roomed wooden structure

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which, in the dim past, had served as stevedore's office and tool-shed for his men.

It was in this ramshackle hut that Slimy Steve Brett lived, and a more desolate and sombre scene than the setting of his hovel would be difficult to find. Even the sun could throw light only on dilapidation, decay and squalor; on the swirling muddy water of the river and filth of flotsam trapped between the piles.

From a convenient angle formed by the corner of one of the warehouses the two detectives reconnoitred the position, and Welland grunted satisfaction to see a thin ribbon of smoke issuing from the tin chimney of the hut.

"Somebody's there," he said, "and whoever it is can't get away except by swimming."

Confident of this, they left their cover and walked briskly along the jetty. No indication of life, save the curling smoke from the chimney, came from the tiny building, and in a few minutes the inspector was banging on the front door while Bryson watched the back.

"Come in, drat you!" shouted a voice in answer to the knocking, and, feeling surprised to be so invited, Welland lifted the door catch and entered.

Bryson, having satisfied himself that there was no exit at the back, ran round in time to follow hard behind. The interior was dim after the sunshine outside, and it took a few moments for their eyes to focus the scene.

"Well I'm blessed!" said Welland at sight of the slim, dark man lounging easily in a chair beside the greasy table, "this is a pleasant surprise. We come to catch the sprat and hook the whale. How *are* you, Mr. John Muller?"

"No better for seeing you, Welland," snarled the man at the table. "What d'you want?"

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From behind his superior Bryson could see now that the sprawling figure was that of a young man, hatchet-faced, with bright, hard eyes and impassive expression.

He was too well—almost flashily—dressed, and especially did the high stiff collar and black cravat appear incongruous in the sordid little room.

John Muller, reflected the young detective-constable, who had a weakness for applying zoological similes to humans, looked like a wolf—a well-dressed, prosperous, smiling wolf, which somehow made his wolfishness more pronounced.

“Where’s your friend Brett?” asked the inspector.

“I don’t know. I came here to see him, but he’s not at home. Anyway, Slimy Steve’s no friend of mine.”

“No? I thought he was. In that case, you won’t mind if we have a look round.”

“Got a warrant?”

“Of course,” Welland smiled. “*Two* warrants and, what’s more, I’m going to use ’em!”

“That’s the spirit,” said Muller, approvingly. “Shame to waste official time and paper. Don’t let me stop you.”

The inspector regarded him closely. Despite his flippant tone and sardonic manner the man was ill at ease, his eyes flickering from side to side like those of a cornered animal.

While this verbal fencing was going on, Bryson had been making a swift survey of the hut. His voice, low-pitched but tense, now sounded from the other room.

“Come here, Inspector; I’ve found something.” After a slight pause he added: “Better bring Muller with you.”

“After you,” invited Welland with ironic courtesy. Muller heaved himself out of the chair and walked leisurely into the other room, closely followed by the watchful inspector.

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This room, smaller than the one they had left, was barely furnished with a single iron bedstead, one straight-backed chair, and a tattered strip of red carpet.

Bryson had kicked the carpet away and was kneeling beside a closed trap-door in the floor at the far end of the room. As the others entered, he turned his head.

"There are red spots round the edges of this trap, Inspector, and a long smudge on one side. Look like bloodstains."

"Watch this fellow," ordered Welland, and stooped over the trap-door. After a few seconds' scrutiny of the ominous-looking marks on the floor-boards he lifted and flung back the door.

Swirling of water sounded loud and very near, and lying flat on his stomach the inspector looked down. The tide was ebbing, the brown water rushing, splashing and gurgling past the slimy piles.

Welland transferred his regard to the higher supports of the jetty. Caught on a projecting beam just below him, he saw a hat. Leaning further over, he reached down, clutched it, and wriggled back into the room to examine his find. It was a black hat of soft felt, dirty and greasy and old.

"Kind of thing Slimy Steve 'ud wear," said Welland. "And now I come to think of it, last time I saw him he had on a soft black Trilby." He looked directly at Muller. "Know anything of this?" he barked.

The young man shrugged. "What?"

"Never mind," answered Welland after a second's thought. "I'm going to arrest you on suspicion, anyway."

"Suspicion of what?"

"The murder of Stephen Brett," replied the inspector grimly. "Those bloodstains are fresh; we find you here

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alone, and Brett's hat down a trap-door. So I warn you now, Muller, that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you at your trial."

"You're crazy," snarled Muller. "I haven't seen Slimy Steve since—since——" He faltered and broke off, and the two detectives saw his face pale.

"Yes, since when?" insinuated the inspector softly.

Muller scowled at him but returned no answer, and Welland turned to address Bryson.

"Search the place," he ordered.

After half an hour of rigorous quest the constable found more proof. Cunningly hidden between a roof-beam and the corrugated iron roof was a small box, and Welland whistled with delight when he opened it and saw a glittering little heap of diamond jewellery winking up at him.

"Part of the haul from over D. & Peel's," he said. "and I should say this was Slimy Steve's share."

Again he looked directly at Muller. "I'm not arresting you on suspicion now," he declared. "You're going in on a charge of wilful murder."

The trial of John Muller for the murder of Stephen Brett did not, at first, arouse much interest. It seemed merely the old sordid story of rogues falling out, and the police piled up such a mountain of evidence against Muller that not even an element of doubt was left to appeal to the public imagination.

The Press, unerring as ever in gauging news interest, gave only half a column to the first afternoon's proceedings.

Some days after the arrest of Muller, a body, presumed to be that of Brett, had been taken out of the river below

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Gravesend. There was nothing in the pockets to reveal identity; the face, head and shoulders had been smashed—presumably by a ship's propellor or paddle-wheel—into hideous shapelessness,

However, what remained of this human wreckage tallied with the description of Brett and was sufficient for prosecuting counsel to build up a damning case.

The accused pleaded not guilty and furthermore was vehement in protestation that he had not seen Brett since the night of the Strand shop burglary.

Unfortunately for him, two rings, identified as stolen from the jeweller's premises, were found in his pocket-wallet when searched following arrest, so he made no attempt to deny responsibility for the robbery.

"Having admitted that," said Treasury Counsel, addressing the jury, "and further admitting—what he could not deny—that Brett was his accomplice, criminal association between them is proved. In this light it seems significant that Muller should be found alone in the hut of the murdered man, whose blood lay still wet upon the floor and whose hat was lying on a beam beneath.

"I suggest that the hat lodged there when the body was dropped through the trap-door into the river.

"Next we have the revolver which was recovered from the river-bed directly beneath the trap-door.

"That weapon has been proved beyond shadow of doubt to have been Muller's, and one discharged cartridge and five live ones were in the cylinder, the weapon not being self-ejecting.

"Having shot Brett and disposed of his body, the murderer would naturally get rid of the revolver. What better hiding-place could he find at short notice than the river? Perhaps he had seen the detectives coming along the jetty

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—remember, the blood had not dried on the floor-boards when they arrived.

“With little time at his disposal, he dare not take the risk of being found wiping away the bloodstains; so, dropping the weapon after the body, he hastily covered the trap-door with the carpet, settled himself in a chair and hoped the police would not search the hut.

“Finally, he states that he had not seen his accomplice since the night of the burglary, and can give no plausible reason for visiting him in the broad daylight of that afternoon beyond saying he received a note asking him to call.

“That note he claims to have destroyed. Is it reasonable to suppose that, having kept apart since the robbery to lessen risk of police notice of their intimacy, Brett would ask his partner in crime to visit him at the hut and in daylight?

“Even granting that he was so unwise, is it likely that, as the defence suggests, he was not there to meet Muller? And if not there, would he leave his hat on a beam below the floor and his share of the proceeds of the robbery under the roof?

“Muller says that he had been waiting a few minutes when the detectives arrived and asks us to believe he merely sat on a chair waiting for Brett to return. Brett *never* returned—never *will* return——”

“The revolver, proved as his, is the last nail in his coffin,” whispered Welland to Bryson. The younger man nodded abstractedly.

In his mind was no thought of the various threads of testimony which had been spun into a fatal web around the accused man. Studying the impassive face, shrewd eyes and unruffled demeanour of John Muller, Bryson

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wondered again how and why the front door of Dover & Peel's had been left open.

Muller—the professional cold-brained cracksman, the “brainiest criminal in Europe”—was not the type to make that stupid slip.

The jury returned a verdict of Guilty, and John Muller was condemned to death. From beginning to end the proceedings had been as commonplace as a trial for murder may be, and when eventually the Court of Criminal Appeal dismissed his automatic petition, no one was surprised.

But a ripple of interest was occasioned when the Home Secretary at the eleventh hour, commuted the death sentence to penal servitude for life.

However, the mild sensation of surprise caused by Muller's good fortune in escaping the gallows very soon subsided.

Prison swallowed him and, as months slipped into years, both he and his crime were forgotten. An enemy of society had been murdered; his killer had become a number.

Justice was satisfied.

Forgotten through long years, apparently for ever. But the murder of Stephen Brett had yet to ask its final fantastic question; had yet to appeal to the imagination of the world as it made grim mockery of the law it broke.

The Governor of Greystone prison frowned. This Muller, number 353, was one of the most awkward prisoners he had known. Not refractory—in fact, his record was excellent—but, well, “awkward” was the only word.

Always that peculiar faint smile, that ironic look in the eyes, as though the fellow saw something humorous in the long grey days of his monotonous punishment and

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was laughing up his sleeve at an everlasting secret joke.

Thoughtfully the Governor decided not to use his stock phrase of cheery farewell on this white-haired man with the bright mocking eyes.

"Good-bye, Muller, and—er—good luck," he substituted briefly, and held out his hand.

Muller ignored it.

"My time's up," he said quietly. "I've done a 'lifer' and been a good boy to qualify for full remission of sentence. Now it's over—penal servitude for life—for a murder *I didn't do.*"

The Governor withdrew his proffered hand and coughed impatiently. Convicts were nearly always innocent.

Muller's lips twisted into the peculiar smile; his eyes lit with the familiar sardonic light.

"I've had plenty of time to think in here", he said, "and in a few minutes I'm going out to reap what I've sown in that damned cell. Since there's not much logic or humour in life, you may see me back again before long——"

"I hope not," said the Governor.

"So do I," responded Number 353 dryly, and abruptly left the room.

Officiously twirling his bunch of keys, the head-warder walked ahead of the departing prisoner to the great main gate.

"All right," he informed the gate-keeper. "Prisoner going out!"

The wicket-door swung open and John Muller walked through it to freedom. By noon he was in London, and half an hour later was talking to a constable on duty outside Scotland Yard.

"Inspector Welland——?" said the policeman slowly.

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"Nobody of that name that I know of connected with the C.I.D."

Muller remembered it was fifteen years ago, and Welland was then over fifty. Of course, he would be retired or dead by now.

"Do you know anyone called Bryson?" he asked.

The constable brightened, and looked with more respect at his questioner.

"Detective-inspector Bryson," he answered. "Oh, yes! As a matter of fact, he passed me on his way in not an hour ago. I'll show you the inquiry office, sir——"

"What name please," asked the uniformed clerk in the inquiry room.

"John Muller."

"Have you business with Inspector Bryson?"

"He helped to arrest me years ago for murder. I'm just out of Greystone this morning, and have something to tell him."

The clerk stared in obvious indecision.

"It's all right," assured Muller pleasantly. "I'm not going to do him in; I bear Bryson no grudge. Just want a few words with him."

"I'll ask if he'll see you," promised the clerk dubiously, and went to the telephone. In a few moments he returned.

"Come with me," he said.

Entering a tiny room on the third floor, Muller closed the door behind him and looked curiously at the stout figure which rose from behind the flat-topped desk to greet him.

Bryson's hair was greying at the temples, his waist-line had increased enormously, but the twinkling brown eyes and amiable grin were vaguely reminiscent to the ex-convict.

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"Good afternoon, Muller," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm pleased to see you looking so fit."

This time, Muller took the extended hand. Inspector Bryson, he thought—"busy" though he was—was human and had the infectious grin of most fat men.

"Prison is a good place for keeping fit—and one's figure," he returned.

The inspector laughed and gently patted the swelling contour of his waistcoat. "You're thinking a few months' 'hard' would do *me* good," he chuckled. "P'raps it would. However, you wanted to see me——"

"Yes; where is Inspector Welland now?"

"Died four years ago."

"Oh! well, never mind. I wanted to tell him or you," said Muller deliberately, "that I never killed Stephen Brett."

"Then——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Muller. "I'm not asking you to believe me, but you are the only man alive now who saw the beginning of my comedy of errors, and I want you to see the end. It's going to be a comic end—funnier than even the beginning!"

The inspector regarded him out of narrowed speculative eyes. Despite the flippant tone and words, the man was in deadly earnest; a glow of excitement flushing through the prison pallor of his gaunt face.

As Bryson looked, his first impression of John Muller flashed back across the years: "Wolfish—a smiling wolf——"

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"Yes, Inspector, there is! I would like to see the police records of my case."

Bryson shook his head. "Sorry, I can't do that."

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"No? Well, I won't argue, and perhaps I can do without 'em. Anyway, will you see me again if I call? It's important."

"Any time you like. Er—how are you fixed for money?"

"Plenty tucked away, thanks," Muller grinned. "Not Dover & Peel's, you understand. Now I'll be off. Don't forget your promise to see me——"

"I won't."

"Right! I'll hold you to it. Good-bye for the present, Inspector."

He had his hand on the door-knob when Bryson said abruptly: "Just a second. I have no right to ask you this and don't answer if you would rather not, but it's puzzled me for fifteen years. Why did you leave the shop door open that night?"

Muller turned, lips curved into his sardonic smile.

"The answer to that, Inspector, is the answer to the whole comedy of errors," he replied. "*I didn't!*"

It was two years later Muller again visited Scotland Yard. This time he was expected, for he had taken the precaution of telephoning Inspector Bryson and making an appointment.

"I've brought a friend," he announced as he entered the inspector's room. "A Mr. Smith, who can tell you something about the murder of Stephen Brett. I've been searching for Smith since I last saw you."

He held the door open for a little man, neatly dressed in dark serge, who entered and stood somewhat nervously beside the desk.

"Sit down," invited the inspector.

Muller grinned, and to Bryson's eyes appeared more

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gaunt and wolfish than ever as he pulled up a chair and sat beside his friend.

"I'm now going to tell you, Inspector," he began, "the truth of what happened in that hut on Northey's Jetty seventeen years ago. If I prove my innocence to your satisfaction, I might ask you to advise me what action to take.

"Mr. Henry Smith, here, has come to corroborate some of my story, for he knew Brett better than anyone."

He paused, eyes glowing brightly with the old sardonic light, before going on:

"Slimy Steve and I arranged to crack Dover & Peel's together. I needed help to get the bricks out of the partition cellar wall and someone to keep a look-out while I opened the safe.

"We got into the empty shop from the back without any trouble, and worked quietly at the bricks for three nights before we had them loosened ready to take out.

"On the fourth night we took 'em out and I sneaked up the cellar steps and slugged and bound the watchman. Brett followed me and kept watch from behind the counter—out of sight in case a policeman looked through the Judas hole—while I cracked the safe.

"I'd loaned him my revolver—not that there was any need for it, but the little rat said he felt safer with it in his hand and I humoured him to save argument.

"He stayed in the shop all the time I was working in the back room and, when I got the safe open and piled the sparklers all together in a cardboard box, I remembered I'd left my bag in the cellar of the empty shop so as to have both hands free to tackle the watchman.

"I told Slimy Steve, and went down to get it. Well, I was coming back with it and was half-way up the stairs when

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I heard him whisper down: 'Get back and keep still! There's two bobbies outside—one looking in!'

"That startled me and, knowing Brett would lie low behind the counter, I did the same in the cellar. I must have crouched there for half an hour.

"At last, hearing no noise from above, I crept up the steps and called softly for Brett. There was no answer, so I went to the top and peeped round the corner of the door into the back room and shop.

"There was no sign of Slimy Steve and the *front door was open*. Even then I didn't tumble to what that crawling sneak-thief had done, but searched the place to see if he was hidden somewhere—shop, back room, behind the counter, and every likely and unlikely place. Brett had gone.

"Suddenly I thought of the diamonds, and dashed back to the safe. *The diamonds had gone as well!*

"Then I saw. He'd framed that yarn about police being outside to keep me below while he ran off with the swag. I suppose he thought the whole lot was better than his agreed share. I sat down and laughed, but, believe me, I laughed the wrong side of my mouth.

"In his hurry he had dropped two rings on the floor beside the safe. I pocketed them, and was just going to shut the front door when I heard footsteps outside.

"You can't mistake that slow heavy tread in the dead of night. It was a policeman coming along, trying the shop doors. I skipped like greased lightning to the cellar steps and lay doggo again, hoping against hope that bobby would pass on.

"The stairs were as black as pitch, so I daren't move in case I stumbled; but I kept my eye glued to the keyhole of the door and hoped for the best.

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"Of course the policeman didn't miss that open door—I never really thought he would—and I watched him come into the shop and flash his lantern about the corners.

"While he was cutting the watchman loose I tip-toed cautiously down the stairs and got clear the way we'd come—by the back door of the empty shop."

Inspector Bryson nodded. It was pleasing to realize that his half-formed reasoning had been correct, and whimsically he regretted that Welland could never know that the open door *had* mattered and was not stupid carelessness on the part of that expert cracksman, John Muller.

"The next few days were damnable," continued Muller. "While I was after Slimy Steve, I knew Welland and you were after me.

"I had to lie low, but every night after dark I went to the hut on the jetty with the faint hope of finding the swine who'd double-crossed me.

"Naturally he was never there, and I could see by the lock of the shack that he'd not been home since the night of the job. Then, early in the afternoon of the fourth day, I got a note from him.

"I'd told him beforehand where we'd hide after pulling the job, and I suppose he made sure I was there by watching and then took his chance to slip the note under the door.

"Of course, Brett was not then suspected of connection with the burglary, so could go about as he liked without fear of arrest.

"The note was like its writer—slimy. It said he was scared I'd find him and scared also that the police would catch him with those sparklers. If I would call at his hut that afternoon he would have the stuff there and we'd divide it according to our original agreement.

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"There was a bit more about being sorry; that he'd been tempted and run off without thinking; and hoping I'd let bygones be bygones when the deal was done.

"All that sickening twaddle, I thought at the time, was just yellow cowardice which one would expect from Slimy Steve. Unluckily I never gave him credit for so much rat cunning, and he led me up the garden the same as he did you——"

"Me!" interposed Bryson. "How do you make out that he fooled me?"

Muller's mouth twitched in a snarling grin.

"You suspected *me* from the beginning," he explained, "but had no idea of Slimy Steve being in it until you received an informer's letter."

"How do *you* know we got a letter?" asked the inspector in astonishment.

"I know everything—now," replied Muller; "and the 'squeal' you got informing on Brett and me *was written by Brett himself!*"

"Eh?" Bryson stared blankly. "Brett informed on himself——?"

"Yes, I underestimated Slimy Steve," said Muller sadly. "He was slimier than I could appreciate.

"However, dragged by lure of those accursed diamonds I took the risk of going to his hut in daylight. After all, I reasoned, there was nothing to implicate me with the robbery.

"But in my heart I knew the chance I was taking. Welland was a shrewd old bird and knew me as well as I knew him, so I was afraid he might have got a line on the safe-cracking as my work.

"Anyway, I went—and you trapped me sitting like a broody hen in the hut!"

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He stopped again, bright eyes flashing mockingly at the mystified detective.

"Then you *did* kill Brett!" declared Bryson.

"No; Brett killed himself."

"And after throwing himself and the revolver down the trap-door he closed it and replaced the carpet," said the inspector sarcastically.

"You're running ahead of yourself," jeered Muller, with a wolfish grin. "*Slimy Steve never went down the trap-door!*" He laughed shortly at Bryson's expression before going on:

"After the burglary Brett found himself with more swag than he had ever dreamed of, and knowing every 'fence' in London he could easily realize on it.

"All that stood in his way were the police and me, so he began to use his rat's brains. The police wouldn't go on looking for a dead man—so one obstacle was removed if he could convince them he was dead. Secondly, a dead man couldn't hurt *him*—you see, he expected me to swing.

"By staging his own murder and sending Welland and me notes at the right time, he killed two nasty birds with one stone. He put me away for life and himself in the clear as dead. Oh! a sweet little piece of work was Slimy Steve Brett!

"That afternoon, just before we were due to arrive at his hut, he smeared blood around the edges of the trap-door, dropped my revolver into the river where it was sure to be found at low water, laid his hat on the beam, and hid a few of the diamonds under the roof.

"Then he went away, and left us to play out the comedy. The cream of the joke was that I didn't know anything about his preparations until Welland and you found them.

"I *was* just sitting on that chair waiting for Brett to return. The body found in the river was merely coincidence

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—some poor devil of a suicide, I suppose; there are plenty picked out of the Thames.”

“Why didn’t you tell the truth about the burglary at your trial?” asked Bryson. “It might have given us a lead.”

“On the other hand, it would probably have hanged me,” pointed out Muller. “All that induced the Home Secretary to respite me, I think, was the element of doubt as regards motive for my killing Brett.

“The prosecution couldn’t prove we’d quarrelled, and knew nothing of the details of the burglary. Luckily for me, the Home Secretary of that time was rather suspicious of evidence that was purely circumstantial, and that saved my neck.

“But had it been known that Brett had double-crossed me by running off with all the swag—well, there was motive enough for my murdering him, and I’d have hanged. I saw that at once, and kept my mouth shut.”

“And how have you found it all out since?”

The ex-convict sighed; his savage eyes became sad and brooding.

“Somewhere, years ago,” he said soberly, “I read something about there being a destiny that shapes our ends. That destiny worked for me.

“When I went to prison I didn’t know what had happened to Brett, and the best guess I could make out was that somebody had killed him just before he got to the hut that day and swiped the jewels.

“Through fifteen years I used to sit in my cell and wonder who had done the murder I was paying for. Not until the last weary year of my sentence did destiny come into Greystone prison to tell me the truth.

“A new batch of prisoners arrived, and among them was a ‘fence’ I’d known. He told me that the stuff from Dover

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& Peel's was still coming bit by bit, into the underground market. As you know, Inspector, the 'fences' always are aware what they're buying.

"Whoever had those diamonds was scared—*so* scared that he was selling them very slowly over a period of years. That knowledge gave me my first hope of squaring my account—as I thought then—with the man who had killed Slimy Steve.

"The 'fence' gave me a description of this fellow who was selling my diamonds. A little man, he said, with a wizened face and short brown beard.

"I was no wiser until he remembered that this little man had a nervous habit of wringing his hands when arguing or pleading about the price, *and was left-handed*.

"We were working in the carpenters' shop when he told me, and it was such a paralysing surprise that I cut my hand badly with the chisel I was using.

"I seemed to see Slimy Steve washing his dirty hands with invisible soap while he begged me to lend him my revolver, and, when I handed it to him, gripping it in his *left* hand. It was then I knew he was still alive.

"Before I left Greystone I'd pumped that 'fence' dry. All he could tell me about the little nervous man with the beard was that he came to London about twice a year to sell diamonds, and his name was——"

Muller paused to grin diabolically and twist half round in his chair. In the tense silence Bryson could hear his watch ticking in his waistcoat pocket, and, with sudden shock of revelation, became aware of the abysmal fear depicted on the face of the man sitting beside the grinning Muller.

The inspector had been so engrossed in the ex-convict's story that he had forgotten the presence of the little man

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in the neat dark serge. With an effort, Bryson broke the tension.

"Yes," he hinted, "his name was——?"

"*Henry Smith!*" cried Muller. "Henry Smith—who is still selling diamonds stolen from Dover & Peel, who is still left-handed, who is still *Slimy Steve Brett!*"

He leaped furiously to his feet and towered over the cringing figure.

"Tell him!" he ordered in a voice thick with hate, "tell the inspector who you are and if my story is true. You can't wriggle, you worm—this is the last act of the comedy ——"

The little man shuddered; his thin face, turned upward, worked pitifully.

"Yes, yes," he sobbed. "I *am* Stephen Brett, and what you've said is true—all true."

Mechanically he began to wring his hands, making the finger joints crack in the extremity of his terror.

Muller laughed harshly. "For two years I've chased him," he said to Bryson, "going from 'fence' to 'fence', asking for a little swine with a brown beard, known as 'Henry Smith'. I got him yesterday, cut off his beard, and found the man I served 'life' for murdering.

"So I kept him with me, frightened him to the depths of his yellow soul, made him confess everything, and now have brought him to you. To *you*, Inspector Bryson, who saw the beginning and shall see the end!"

His voice dropped to ordinary conversational tone as he continued:

"I don't need your advice, Inspector; I don't want Government compensation in money for the long years which turned my hair white and my heart to quarry-stone. I want Justice, and, by God! I'm going to have it!"

PAYMENT IN ADVANCE

His right hand flew swift as a striking snake to a side pocket of his jacket, and a blue steel automatic gleamed in his steady grip. Before Bryson could move Muller had fired three bullets into the quivering body of Brett.

The little man slumped sideways from the chair, dead before he hit the floor. Bryson rushed around the desk, but Muller laughed, held up his left hand in peaceable arresting gesture, and flung the smoking pistol into a corner of the room.

"It's only Justice," he said softly, and pointed to the body. "I did penal servitude for life for killing that man. The law insisted I killed him fifteen years ago, and to the last farthing did I pay the penalty of the law.

"Now I have done the murder I paid for, and, if there be Justice on earth, the law must acknowledge my payment and honour its own receipt.

"Which is for payment in full, Inspector Bryson; payment in advance!"

W. J. P. H.
1924
in receipt

Good morning
Dwells
who
will read
this
book

BY
FRANK KING

★
WIRE

Dr. Alan Frosby swore sleepily as he turned over. "Oh, shurrup!" he growled at the whirring telephone by the bedside.

The instrument persisted, wakening him more fully. He stretched out a hand to the electric switch and pressed it. The room remained in darkness.

"Hang!" he muttered. "It would go off just now! A fuse burnt out, I suppose."

Raising himself on an elbow, he groped for the telephone and lifted the receiver.

"Well?" he snapped. "Dr. Frosby. What is it?"

The voice at the other end of the wire was agitated.

"This is Bickers, sir. Can you come at once? I've just found Mr. Durkin in his bath, sir. I—I think he's dead."

"I'll be along in two shakes," said Frosby, replacing the receiver.

Wide awake now, he struck a match and looked at his watch. It was only ten minutes to one. He had not been asleep more than half an hour.

It was a dashed nuisance, the current going off like this; difficult to dress properly in the dark. There was an electric

torch somewhere in one of the drawers. Finding it, he propped it on the dressing-table, and managed fairly well in the circumscribed illumination.

He hoped Arthur Durkin wasn't dead. The bad-tempered old fellow was one of his wealthiest patients. Probably the best known man in Bradleigh. But, of course, with a heart like that——

The electric current came on suddenly, startling him.

"Been something wrong at the works," he mused, blinking in the strong light. "Beastly inconvenient. Hope it doesn't go off again."

It didn't. Dr. Frosby finished dressing, put on his boots, and hurried out to his garage.

The Elms, Arthur Durkin's house, was a big old-fashioned place, standing in a large garden, a mile and a half on the Selston road. Five minutes later the doctor's car sped up the drive and stopped on the gravelled terrace in front of the door.

There was no need to ring. A white-haired old man, wrapped in a shabby dressing-gown, stood shivering on the threshold.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," he quavered. "It's seemed a long time waiting."

Frosby glanced at his watch.

"Just twelve minutes since you phoned, Bickers. Not too bad, surely?"

"I know you've done your best, sir. Will you come straight up? Though I'm afraid there's nothing you can do."

The doctor followed the old butler into the spacious, comfortably furnished hall, and up the thickly carpeted stairs. At the end of a corridor, the door of the bathroom stood wide open.

FRANK KING

One glance at the livid blue face of the motionless figure lying in the bath, covered with water, was enough for Frosby. There was an added gravity in his eyes as he turned to Bickers.

"How did you come to find him here?" he asked sharply.

"I—I was reading in bed, sir," stammered the butler, "when——"

"Reading? Haven't your lights been off?"

"No, sir. Not to my knowledge."

"Mine have. Evidently a local fault, then. All right. Go on."

"I heard Mr. Durkin go into the bathroom, sir. It seemed to me that the taps were running for a very long time, so I——"

"So you came to see if all was well, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you saw at once that your master was dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you notice that he'd been murdered, Bickers?"

The old servant's jaw dropped.

"Murdered, sir?" he echoed.

"Yes, Bickers. Strangled. That facial appearance is characteristic. The staring eyes, the protruding tongue, the froth on the——"

Frosby broke off. From a cupboard just behind him had come a faint scuffling sound.

It was a large cupboard of old-fashioned type, containing the hot-water cylinder, and space for airing clothes. He pulled the door open. There was a man inside.

The man growled like a wild beast, and made a furious dash forward. Though out of practice, Frosby had once been a shining light of the athletic club at his university. His right fist connected unerringly with the blue unshaven chin, and the man went down in a sprawled heap.

Frosby stood for a moment gazing at the ugly, weather-beaten face. Then he turned to the frightened old butler.

"You'd better ring for the police, Bickers," he said calmly. "I'll look after this gentleman until they come."

Superintendent Goring was a large, pleasant-featured man, a good disciplinarian, respected by his subordinates in spite of more than a touch of temper. He brought Detective-Sergeant Morlant with him, and listened with interest to Dr. Frosby's statement.

"So we've got the murderer without searching for him, eh?" he said, studying the still unconscious figure on the bathroom floor. "Charlie Simms isn't it, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir." Michael Morlant nodded his grey head. "But we've no proof that he——"

Goring sighed. The grizzled Scotsman could be very trying at times. It was all very well for a police officer to be keen on verifying his facts, but Meticulous Michael, as his colleagues had named him, frequently carried his passion for truth too far. Even in the simplest, most straightforward case, he was not satisfied until every "i" had been dotted, every "t" crossed. And Goring knew that now he had been unleashed there would be no holding him in whilst any statement remained unverified.

"All right, sergeant," he said ruefully. "We'd better start at the beginning. What can you tell us, Bickers?"

"I last saw Mr. Durkin alive at about ten-thirty," began the old butler, choosing his words as though giving evidence in a court of law. "Mr. Innis was with him and——"

"Who's Mr. Innis?" interrupted Morlant, notebook in hand.

"He's the accountant at the mill, sir."

"Ah, yes, I remember him. Rather a gay dog. What was he doing here last night?"

FRANK KING

"That I can't say, sir. I fancy he and the master were discussing the strike. They had a lot of account books in front of them when I took in the whisky just after ten. Mr. Durkin said that I needn't wait up; so after I'd finished my little jobs I went to bed.

"I'm a poor sleeper, sir, and I usually read in bed for an hour or two. I heard Mr. Innis go at twelve-fifteen, and the master bolt the door after him. The master came up to bed straight away. He was whistling 'Sally in our Alley', sir, as he often does, rather out of breath, like, which is due to his heart. I remember thinking that he wasn't very worried about the strike.

"I sleep in the next room to his, sir, in case he needs anything during the night. I heard him moving about in his room for a while, then go on to the bathroom. I knew he didn't want me or he would have called. So I went on with my reading. It must have been several minutes after that when I realized that the taps were still running. I listened, and everything was silent. Not a sound except the taps.

"I—I thought something was wrong, sir, so I got up to see. I found him just as you see him, sir, covered with the water, which was running out of the emergency outlet. I knew at once that he was dead. I turned off the taps and telephoned for Dr. Frosby."

"You didn't see anything of this man?" asked Goring, indicating the unconscious figure of Charlie Simms.

"No, sir."

"You've no idea how he got here? You heard no struggle or anything?"

"No, sir."

"And that's rather curious," commented Sergeant Morlant. "You seem to have good ears. Still"—he turned to

Frosby—"I'd like to verify the fact that he was strangled, Doc."

Frosby shrugged. "You can't prove that definitely without a post-mortem," he explained. "But here's something that should be good enough for you. I noticed it while I was waiting for you."

He lifted up the dead man's head. A thin purple line could now be seen, running round the flabby neck.

"Shades of Bruce!" exclaimed Morlant. "He's been done in with his own product—wire!"

"That's what I thought," agreed Frosby. "Strangled with a loop of wire. It makes a bruise like that. I've not the slightest doubt about it."

"We're getting at the motive now," observed Goring, pulling at his heavy moustache. "Charlie Simms worked at the mill, didn't he, Sergeant?"

"Yes, he was a wire-drawer."

"And there's been a lot of bitterness amongst the men about this strike?"

"Yes." Meticulous Michael hesitated. "But we've no proof that he——"

"He's coming round," interrupted Goring hastily. "We'll soon have the truth out of him."

It was several minutes before Charlie Simms recovered sufficiently to be able to talk. And then, in a hoarse voice as unprepossessing as his appearance, he told an entirely unconvincing story.

"I were doin' a bit o' rabbitin'," he began sullenly, "in the coppice back o' the house."

"Poaching," said Goring.

"We've got to live, 'aven't we? An' since yond old devil put the screw on our wages, there's bin mighty little for —"

FRANK KING

"Never mind about that. Get on with it."

"All right. Well, then, I were poachin'. I seed a light in this bathroom winder, an' I stopped, watchin' it a bit, wishin' I'd got the old skinflint in me two 'ands. Then I seed somebody climb out."

"Climb out of the window?"

"Yes. There were a ladder standin' there. 'E climbed down it, an' 'e ran off into the darkness."

"You couldn't see who it was, I suppose?" There was a faint sneer in Goring's voice.

"No, I couldn't. But there were somebody, though I'm not expectin' you to believe me. I stood for a bit, wonderin' what to do. Then I thought I'd go up that ladder meself, an' take a peek inside.

"Well, I did. I went up without makin' a sound. I opened the winder an' pushed the curtain aside. Then I seed yond old devil lyin' in the bath.

"I thought 'e'd fainted an' were drownin'. I were in two minds whether to leave 'im there—an' I wish to God I'd done it! But I climbed in through the winder to see if I could 'elp 'im. Just as I'd got in, these two gents came 'urrying up the stairs. I 'adn't time to get out again, so I 'id in that cupboard. An' when one of 'em said the old devil 'ad bin murdered, I knew I were for it. I were goin' to spring out on 'em an' get away before you cops came. But I made a noise an'—well, you know what 'appened."

Goring's eyebrows lifted significantly, as he glanced at his subordinate.

"That will certainly require a good deal of corroboration," said Morlant, studying his notes. "If he's speaking the truth, he must have climbed in at the window after Bickers had discovered the tragedy and turned the taps off, while he was waiting for Dr. Frosby to come. What time

W I R E

was it when you saw the man climb down the ladder, Simms?"

"I dunno. I ain't got no watch."

"How long did you wait before you climbed up?"

"I dunno. Mebbe ten minutes."

"Bickers telephoned Dr. Frosby at twelve-fifty. If Simms is speaking the truth, the murderer must have left the house about twelve-forty."

"What the deuce are you getting at, Sergeant?" asked Goring irritably. "The whole thing's perfectly clear and—"

"I'm wondering why Bickers—if *he's* telling the truth—didn't hear any struggle in the bathroom."

"I think we can rely on Bickers, Sergeant. As for hearing the struggle—well, the taps were running; and a man with a loop of wire round his neck can't make a lot of noise."

"Wire?" Charlie Simm's hoarse voice broke in. His ugly features were twitching. "The old devil was strangled with wire?"

"You know darned well he was! Why do you——"

The man made a sudden dash for the door. Morlant tripped him up, and rolled on the floor with him. Simms fought furiously, but he had not yet completely recovered from Frosby's blow, and the detective had little difficulty in overpowering him. Producing a pair of handcuffs, he made sure of his capture. Then he went methodically through the man's pockets.

Almost immediately he made a most significant discovery—a loop of thin wire.

"I fancy that's why he tried to get away, sir," he said, handing it to Goring.

The superintendent's eyes opened wide.

"Heavens, yes!" he cried, holding the wire close to the prisoner's face. "What have you to say to that, Simms?"

FRANK KING

"It's a rabbit-snare," muttered the man surlily.

"Rabbit-snare! It's the wire you used to kill old Durkin!" Goring dragged Simms roughly to his feet, then turned to Morlant. "Well, Sergeant? That's about all we want, eh?"

"There are one or two points I'd like to verify," began Meticulous Michael cautiously. "About——"

"There would be!" Goring's voice was sarcastic. "And I suppose you'd like the photographer and fingerprint men sent along?"

"Yes, please. We've no actual proof yet that——"

"All right, Sergeant. Have it your own way. I'm going to take Simms to the station and charge him. Perhaps you'll be good enough to report to me there when you've finished."

For quite a while after Goring's departure with the prisoner and Dr. Frosby, Michael Morlant stood staring round the bathroom. There was no brilliant idea in his grizzled old head. He was no super-sleuth who had glimpsed clues that his superior had missed. Simply, he was not yet satisfied with the proofs of Charlie Simms's guilt.

He had no doubt in his own mind that the man had killed Durkin. That story about the ladder sounded very far-fetched. Simms was a rough, vicious character, well known to the police. He had worked—occasionally—at Durkin's wire-mill, and was out on strike with the rest of the men. There had been a lot of threats against Durkin, who was unquestionably a hard master. Most of these were hot air, but Simms was just the type to put them into action. His presence in the house, his attempts to escape, above all, the loop of wire in his pocket—these facts would be sufficient for any jury.

But they were not sufficient for Meticulous Michael. He didn't like circumstantial evidence. Definite proof—or a confession—was the only thing that would satisfy him. At the moment Charlie Simms didn't look like confessing; the alternative was to find more satisfactory proof of his guilt.

So the old Scotsman commenced a careful search of the bathroom. There was little to delay him here. Durkin's bathrobe was flung over a chair, his slippers lay beside it; apart from these, the room contained only the usual toilet requisites.

There were no footprints; but the ground outside was hard and dry. Morlant thought he could distinguish one or two fingerprints on the white-painted window. If these had been left by Simms they proved nothing either way. Nor did the ladder leaning against the house. He grew all the keener because his search was unavailing; the proof he wanted must be hidden away somewhere.

He transferred his attention to Durkin's bedroom. There was nothing here to help him. The murdered man's clothes were neatly folded on a chair just as he had left them before going for his bath. No sign of hurry or perturbation. No hint of a clue.

Morlant went back to the bathroom. The photographer and fingerprint men had arrived and finished their work, and he gave permission for the body to be moved. He was helping to carry it into the bedroom when he noticed the two small grooves at the side of the livid nose.

"Where are his eyeglasses?" he asked suddenly.

"I couldn't say, sir," stammered the old butler. "I—I haven't seen them about."

"He was very short-sighted, wasn't he?"

"Very, sir. He could hardly see at all without his glasses."

FRANK KING

"He probably wouldn't wear them in his bath. But if his eyes were so bad, he'd most likely keep 'em on until he got into it. Now what's become of 'em?"

Another search as futile as the first. There was no sign in the bathroom of the missing eyeglasses. Morlant did find a pair, in a case, tucked away at the back of a drawer in the bedroom, but they were dusty.

"A spare pair, these," he told Bickers. "The others must be somewhere. We've got to find them."

With his usual meticulous care, he searched the corridor, the staircase and the hall, on the unlikely chance that Durkin had dropped the glasses as he came to bed. He searched the dining-room and the library, where it was remotely possible that they had been laid down and forgotten. He found nothing at all until, on hands and knees, he was scrutinizing the carpet in the library. And there he came upon a tiny splinter of glass, hidden in the pile of the carpet, which was obviously part of a lens from the missing pince-nez.

He went over the carpet again, very carefully, but found no more splinters. He rose to his feet and stood looking thoughtfully at Bickers.

"It seems to me——" he began, then checked himself. "But no; we've no proof of that yet. What tune did you say Mr. Durkin was whistling when he came to bed?"

"'Sally in our Alley', sir. It was always a favourite of his."

"I don't suppose you know much about this strike at the mill, Bickers?"

"No, sir."

"Who's the likeliest person to give me all particulars about it?"

"I should say Mr. Innis, sir."

WIRE

"Do you think he'd mind me digging him out of bed in the middle of the night?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't, sir. He'll be only too ready to help. He thought the world of Mr. Durkin, sir. Almost like a son."

"Where does he live, Bickers?"

"Castleton Gardens. Number Eleven. It's very near to Dr. Frosby's house, sir."

"I know where it is." Morlant nodded thoughtfully. "I think I'd better slip along there at once."

Mr. Robert Innis was heavy with sleep when he unlocked his door in response to the detective's ring. But his eyes opened wide with horror when he heard the news.

"Come in, please," he said, leading the way across the little hall. "This is terrible—terrible! And to think that I saw him such a short time ago!"

He was a middle-aged bachelor who somehow contrived to look much younger than his years. His silk dressing-gown was rather florid. The sitting-room into which he ushered Morlant contained many photographs of girls.

"Terrible!" he murmured again, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his dressing-gown. "Sit down, won't you, Sergeant? What can I do to help you?"

"So far as we know," explained Morlant, "you were the last person to see Mr. Durkin alive—except the murderer, of course."

"Bickers?"

"Bickers had gone to bed."

"Ah, yes. I remember Mr. Durkin telling him not to wait."

"That's right. Well, I wondered if Mr. Durkin had said anything to you about expecting any violence. I'm trying to get at the motive for this crime."

FRANK KING

"I see." Innis frowned thoughtfully. "No, he said nothing about that. There were the strikers, of course. He knew that threats had been made, but he scoffed at them."

"Perhaps it would have been better if he had taken them more seriously. Bickers says he thought you were discussing the strike."

"We were. We were going over the books to see if we could possibly make the men a better offer." Innis nodded towards a bureau on which lay several account books. "There they are. Just as I left them when I came in."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask the result of the conference?"

"We decided that we couldn't do any more. The men would have to accept our terms, or stay out on strike."

"You know Charlie Simms, I suppose?"

"Yes. In the circumstances, I'd rather not say anything about him."

"I won't press you. We know quite sufficient about him."

Morlant paused for a moment. "I want to verify Bickers's statement as far as possible. He says you left The Elms about twelve-fifteen."

"Precisely twelve-fifteen," agreed Innis. "I looked at my watch as I left because I wanted to see just how long it would take me to walk home."

"And how long did it take you?"

"Twenty minutes exactly."

"Not bad going, considering you had those books to carry. You arrived home at twelve-thirty-five, then?"

"Yes. I sat up about a quarter of an hour making a few notes on the conversation I'd had with Mr. Durkin, then I went to bed."

"But——" began Morlant, then stopped.

"But what, Sergeant?"

"Nothing. I was only surprised at your energy, Mr. Innis. But I suppose you had to get out a statement of some kind for issue to the workpeople this morning?"

"That's right. It was simpler to sit down and do it while the figures were fresh in my mind."

"Naturally." Morlant rose to his feet. "Well, it's evident that the strike provided the motive for this murder. There's no other possibility." He produced a case from his pocket. "Have a cigarette, Mr. Innis."

"Thanks." Innis accepted a cigarette. He struck a match and proffered the light. "Anything more I can do for you, Sergeant?"

"If it wouldn't be troubling you too much," suggested the detective, lighting his cigarette. "Superintendent Goring is in charge of this case, and he's very worried about it. I'd like you to come along to the station and tell him what you've told me. Make a formal statement, you know."

"Now?"

"If you don't mind."

"All right." Innis shrugged. "Wait until I get some clothes on."

At the police station Robert Innis dictated a statement and signed it. Superintendent Goring read it over with a puzzled frown.

"I can't see that this helps us much, Sergeant," he complained.

"It doesn't," agreed Morlant equably.

"Then why did you trouble Mr. Innis to come here at this time of night?"

"Just because he's lying, sir," said Morlant. "Because he's the murderer of Arthur Durkin."

The two men stared at him.

"What on earth——" began Innis.

FRANK KING

"There's only one thing I don't know, Mr. Innis, and that's why you killed him. I expect you've been falsifying your books. But I've no proof of that—yet."

"I never heard such rubbish in——"

"You see, sir," Morlant addressed the superintendent, "I discovered that Mr. Durkin's glasses had been broken in the library. I couldn't understand why, short-sighted as he was, he didn't get out his spare pair at once."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sergeant," said Goring, rather helplessly.

"Well, I came to the conclusion that he was already dead when he came upstairs. That fitted in with the fact that Bickers had heard no struggle."

"Of all the wild statements," cried Innis angrily, "that is about——"

"Bickers didn't see Durkin, if you remember, sir," continued Morlant calmly. "Nor did he see Innis go. He simply heard the door shut and bolted, and someone come upstairs. I worked the problem out in my own mind like this:

"Durkin suspected that Innis was embezzling the firm's money, and ordered him to bring his books up to The Elms. Knowing that discovery was inevitable, Innis decided to kill him, and placed the ladder against the bathroom window in readiness. He wanted it to appear that the crime had been committed by someone from outside the house. He thought the fact that he had been in the house *and left it* would divert any suspicion from himself. He probably reckoned that the use of the wire in the murder would make us think it had been committed by a disgruntled workman."

"And so it was!" exclaimed Innis, growing calmer. "All this idiotic talk doesn't alter the fact that you caught Simms redhanded."

"Simms was rather a lucky coincidence for you, wasn't he? But his story is true in every particular. You strangled Durkin in the library soon after Bickers had gone to bed. In the process Durkin's eyeglasses were knocked off and broken. You carefully collected the broken fragments, but overlooked one tiny splinter in the pile of the carpet.

"At twelve-fifteen you opened the door, then noisily closed and bolted it, to give the impression that you had gone. You carried Durkin's body up to his bedroom and undressed it, knowing that Bickers would hear the movements. You carried it into the bath, set the taps running, and made your escape by the window."

Morlant paused. Innis was now sneering openly. Superintendent Goring looked grave.

"I suppose the thing *may* have been done as you suggest, Sergeant," he said. "But I must confess you've given me no proof of it."

"I'm coming to the proof, sir. You'll admit, if I'm right so far, that the murderer must have been well acquainted with the household. He knew that Bickers would be reading in bed. He knew that Durkin's favourite tune was 'Sally in our Alley'."

"Yes. Go on."

"I went to see Innis. He lied to me. He said he got home at twelve-thirty-five. I knew he didn't get home before twelve-fifty-five. Why should he lie to me? I knew that the murderer, if Simms's story was correct, hadn't left The Elms until twelve-forty. And it's twenty minutes' walk to Innis's house."

"How could you know that he didn't get home earlier, Sergeant?"

"There was a motor accident at twelve-fifteen, sir. The car knocked over an electric distributor serving the district

FRANK KING

in which Innis's house is situated. The current was cut off, of course, and the damage was not repaired until twelve-fifty-five. We were notified about it here at the station just before Bickers phoned for us. From what Innis told me, it was perfectly clear that he knew nothing about this temporary stoppage. Therefore he didn't get home until after it was rectified."

"I see." Goring stared at Innis, whose face had paled. "But that's not proof, Sergeant—proof that he actually committed the murder."

"There's just one thing more," said Morlant. "I noticed that he kept his hands in the pockets of his dressing-gown. I had to offer him a cigarette to get a look at them. Look at them yourself, sir!"

Despite Innis's frenzied protests, Goring forced his clenched fists open. On the thumb and forefinger of each hand were thin purple lines like bruises.

"It's not the easiest job in the world to strangle a man with wire," explained Morlant. "You saw the thin linear bruise round Durkin's neck. Here are identical marks made on soft fingers by the pressure of the wire as Innis pulled it tight."

"Not much doubt about that!" cried Goring. "I'm satisfied now!"

When Robert Innis, sobbing and broken, had made his confession and been led away, the detective reached for his hat.

"Where are you going?" demanded the superintendent.

"To that coppice behind The Elms," replied Meticulous Michael earnestly. "I want to verify Charlie Simms's statement that he had been poaching."

ROBERT LADLINE

135.

ROBERT LADLINE

to say that it emerged into the light of day, one night when — But that wouldn't be right either, because there wasn't any daylight. Anyway, the affair showed itself when the Girdons were giving an informal studio dance—a drop in if you're passing sort of “do”.

Lance Girdon was, of course (as the gossip writers say), the clever young portrait painter, and Greta Girdon (also of course) was his wife, in the eyes of the Chelsea Registrar, if not in the eyes of heaven.

Slatterby was one of those who had dropped in, and thereby he witnessed the ugly business that developed. At the time he was standing—nosy-parkering his enemies said behind his modish back—in the little archway that led from the big studio into Greta's softly lit little retreat.

Behind him the dancers were dipping to the music of the radiogram, like an erratically moving frieze, but before him in the dusk of the sanctuary were Greta and that attractive young rotter, Hugh Carver.

Slatterby frowned at what he saw, because he was nothing like so bad as his books suggested. The Girdons had been married less than a year, and now—this!

Greta and Carver had their backs to Slatterby. Greta, a palish, dark young woman, graceful, with a flair for clothes, and most unfathomable eyes, was reclining in a deep divan chair and Carver was sitting on one of its arms, leaning over her.

Carver's handsome face drew closer to Greta's. At that moment Girdon, passing along the studio with a tray of cocktails in his hands, reached the arch.

He paused to offer Slatterby a “pink lady”. Slatterby turned and took one; then, because he was very fond of Girdon, tried to fill as much of the arch as he could, which was not very much owing to his lack of inches, and Lance

ST. SLATTERBY'S TEMPTATION

—a big blond fellow—saw the figures on the divan.

Perched on its arm, Carver had bent lower still. A hand rested on the upholstering of the back just above the white sheen of Greta's neck, and the delicate oval of her face was lifted up to Carver's. Girdon could see the gently parted lips.

Then four things happened:

Carver kissed Greta.

Greta cried: "Don't!" angrily, and sprang to her feet.

The tray of cocktails crashed to the floor.

Slatterby commenced living one of his own novels, only the outcome was rather more tragic than he usually contrived.

For a moment Girdon stood as if turned to stone. The arm that had supported the tray remained crooked. Then he jerked to life. He reached Carver in two strides, and in as many seconds had yanked him off the chair.

Girdon swung Carver round so that he faced his blazing eyes. The artist's face was suffused with the violence of his passion, and Carver was suddenly pallid with fear and cringing. Girdon's hand gripped his throat. Carver let out a squawk of alarm.

"You young scoundrel!" Girdon roared in a thick voice. "I'll kill you!"

And now Carver's pallor grew fiery, and from fire changed to purple, and from purple to black. Then his mouth opened and his tongue showed, and he grew limp in Girdon's grip.

Girdon came to himself. He released Carver, who fell on to the divan chair, lying sprawled across arm and seat. Girdon looked about him in a dazed manner. Slowly he passed his hand through his hair. Then he looked at Greta.

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Slatterby was also looking at her. He was puzzled by her expression. After her one angry cry she had stood with her fingers interlaced and her chin resting on them, passively, watching her husband throttling Carver.

There was a queer light in her eyes that Slatterby failed to understand. To him it almost seemed there was contentment there. Any way, there was no grief.

Presently, she became aware that Slatterby was watching her, and her eyes rested on his for a moment. Her expression changed and again he was unable to read it. Then she stared at her husband. Girdon's face was now white, and he was trembling.

Girdon seemed to come out of a trance. He shook himself.

"I'm sorry for the disturbance," he said.

He turned to the guests who were crowding under the arch.

"Carry on with the dance," he exclaimed. "Carry on with the dance!"

Carver began to groan, and presently he sat up.

"Give me a drink, somebody," he said. "My throat's on fire."

They gave him a drink. He gulped it down. A little later he arose to his feet, and bowed to Greta, who all this time had remained in the same attitude without speaking.

"Thanks for a pleasant evening," he muttered.

He ignored Girdon, and walked unsteadily away. Slatterby saw him out. When he came back he gave Girdon a drink.

Girdon took it. From first to last he had said no word to his wife. When he had drunk the stiff whisky he extended his arm towards Greta.

"Shall we dance?" he suggested.

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Greta dropped her laced fingers from under her chin, and came to him timidly.

"I'm sorry, Lance, for—for what happened," she said.

"Not your fault," he answered. "Dancing?"

They danced a slow fox-trot and then a waltz. At the end of the second dance, Girdon let her go.

"I'm going for a tramp to work off my temper," he announced.

This was nothing new. Only exercise could dissipate the fumes of his anger. He was quick tempered; often Greta was frightened of his outbursts, so often did they sweep volcanically over him and remain with him, muttering and growling and shaking him until he found relief in a furious march through the streets.

"Very well," she answered, with a smile. "Walk it off, by all means." Slatterby caught the smile and a flash of something, he couldn't say what, that followed it. Then she glanced at the synchronous clock. The time was ten-thirty.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Slatterby asked.

"No, I will go alone," Girdon answered.

He put on his hat and coat, fumbled for his stick—a heavy ebony affair with a silver knob—found it was unaccountably missing from the stand in the hall, cursed and flung out of the house. The door shut with a crash.

Greta smiled at Slatterby.

"He's like a whirlwind when he is angry," she said. "Dance?"

Slatterby extended his arm. They danced one fox-trot, then Greta announced a headache.

The party became a rapid failure. By twos and threes

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the dozen or so guests made their excuses and vanished. At last only Slatterby was left. He sat down opposite Greta and looked at her gravely.

"Why don't you lie down?" he suggested. "Take a couple of aspirins. You've had a shock, you know."

"I think I'll go to bed," she answered, "if you will excuse me."

Slatterby wondered why she answered so quickly. Probably it was an excuse to get rid of him.

"Sleep—tired nature's sweet restorer," he quoted.

"Don't be a bromide," she retorted, with a smile, and extending her hand.

Slatterby laughed, and took his departure. Greta heard the door shut after him. With the going of Slatterby she was alone in the house; the general maid they employed did not sleep on the premises.

She looked at the clock again. The hour was after eleven, a few minutes past.

Meanwhile Girdon had been walking furiously: King's Road, the Embankment, the Power Station, later Hammersmith. He continued to walk westward wherever his feet took him. He continued to walk and think.

He didn't blame Greta. He blamed himself for allowing the young pup the freedom of the studio.

Who was Carver? He didn't know. Somebody had introduced him one Sunday, he supposed. Couldn't remember who it was. Didn't matter. He'd never come again.

The trouble was he himself was too easy-going. He'd have to be stricter. Another thing, there were too many cocktails shaken in his house. He wished the Yankees would keep their drinks to themselves.

Fascinating things, though, cocktails. Studio smelt like a bar half the time. Wouldn't have it. Fewer cocktails and

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fewer cads dropping in to lap them up. That's all they came for. Not to *see* him, he'd bet.

Queer bad-tempered beast himself. Everbody said so. Even Greta—sometimes. Well, he was. He'd got a devil of a temper. His temper sometimes frightened himself.

Now that young swine Carver . . .

His anger returned at full flood as he spoke the name to himself. His face went crimson, his eyes protruded, his hands suddenly extended themselves—fingers bent and spread talonwise . . .

When Girdon returned home Greta had not gone to bed after all, but she had changed her frock. If he noticed the fact he made no comment. He was too full of something else. Too upset.

He came almost running into the studio. Greta's eyes widened. He was white and frightened looking. Slowly Greta arose to her feet as he approached her.

She reached her full height only as he came up to her and then he overtopped her by a head, so that she had to look up into his worried face.

"What . . . whatever's the matter?" she asked.

"Carver," he began, then stopped. "Carver——" he got going again—"Carver's . . . Carver's dead!"

"What!"

"Carver's dead," her husband repeated. "Murdered."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I've seen him. Head all smashed in." His face twisted up at the recollection. "Blood all over his face and clothes."

Without taking her eyes off him Greta sank slowly back into her chair. She was deathly white, and her expression asked the question her tongue refused to shape.

"I didn't kill him," he answered. "I didn't kill him. I

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don't know *who* killed him." He repeated it several times—"I don't know *who* killed him."

He said it as if convincing himself. Then he stood staring at her in silence. Greta's hands pressed the arms of her chair so that the blood was driven from her fingers and the pointed nails became unnaturally white.

Girdon's gaze rested on them a moment, and then quickly passed on. He stared beyond her into the dying fire.

"Where was he . . . ?" she asked presently.

"In the Passage."

Greta was thinking that her husband had threatened to kill Carver, that a dozen people had heard him utter the threat and seen him assault the man. And Girdon knew what she was thinking.

He wandered across the studio and mixed himself a drink. He drank it in a mechanical sort of way, wandering the while about the big room, examining this, fingering that, all without attention. And his wife's eyes followed him about.

Suddenly he swung round on her.

"I tell you I didn't kill him!" he shouted. "Since he left here I never set eyes on him until I stumbled over him in the Passage!"

"What did you do then?" she asked.

"I wondered what it was my foot had touched. I took out my lighter. I got a light—the Passage was pitch black like it always is—and then I saw who it was. I saw it was Carver."

"And then?"

"I stepped across him . . . and came home."

"Sensible," she commented dryly.

It dawned on him that she was acting unnaturally.

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"Greta!" he cried. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes."

The sudden suspicion that she thought he had killed Carver died out of his face. He turned to a table and took a cigarette from a box that lay upon it. Then he took off the overcoat he had continued to wear, and slipped his hand into the pocket in which he kept his lighter.

It wasn't there. He tried another pocket.

"Why did you change your frock?" he asked, continuing his search.

"I was miserable. This frock always bucks me a bit."

Well, it was a jolly frock, Girdon mused. Then his face became puzzled. Pocket after pocket was explored. More and more rapidly.

Finally he snatched up the overcoat from the chair upon which he had draped it, and frantically went through its pockets. Slowly the colour the whisky had brought to his face drained away.

"God!" he suddenly cried out.

"What is it?" Greta demanded.

"Lighter . . . I've lost my lighter!"

Greta sat up straight, and stared into his frightened face.

"You mean you dropped it when . . . ?" she asked slowly. "When you . . . ?" her voice trailed away.

"It's not here!" Girdon answered wildly.

And now fear descended upon him.

"It's got my initials engraved on it!" he cried.

"Oh, Lance!"

"I must have dropped it when I put it in my pocket. I mean it must have slipped down instead of going into the pocket. Yet I ought to have heard it strike the asphalt."

A flash of hope illuminated his face.

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"If—if it fell on Carver you wouldn't hear anything," she said, striking the hope away.

He stared at her in a stricken way for a moment, then he seized his overcoat. This brought her to her feet.

"What are you going to do?" she exclaimed.

"I'm going back," he answered. "I may be able to find it."

"You mustn't! You mustn't!" she declared. "Supposing someone found you there?"

"I'll chance it!"

"No! No, Lance, you are mad to think of it. Mad! Mad!"

She ran and placed herself before him. In his panic fear he thrust her aside, and rushed out. She ran after him, calling him to stop, but he outstripped her and she heard the street door shut while she was still in the studio. There was an odd look in her long dark eyes that was in no way one of fear.

He ran through two streets, panic-driven, and plunged into the Passage, a narrow winding alley running between back garden walls. It formed a short cut into King's Road, but because it was completely unlit and very dark it was little used at night.

Within the Passage the need for caution was so urgent that it overcame his fears, and he forced himself to tip-toe. He traversed half its length. Then he stopped, barely suppressing a cry. A minute later he turned, and crept back the way he had come.

Like a stricken animal he made for home.

Greta looked at him inquiringly. His face answered her. His words confirmed its message.

"The body has been found," he said. "I heard voices. The police were there and young Enderby. He was telling them who Carver was."

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"Enderby was here tonight, at the party," Greta said.

"Yes."

"He'll tell the police of what happened here," she said slowly.

"Sure to."

"They'll come here, and . . ."

The front door bell rang, loudly, authoritatively. Greta jumped, and the skin of Girdon's head grew icily cold. His scalp felt like a snowfield under his hair.

They stared at one another breathlessly. Then the bell rang again: two short, quick rings. They relaxed.

"Slatterby!" they exclaimed together in relieved tones.

"What does he want at this time of night?" Greta wondered.

Girdon shrugged his broad shoulders, and went to the front door. Slatterby it was, all right.

"I was passing and saw your light. Guessed you hadn't gone to bed . . ."

His voice trailed off, and he looked at Girdon expectantly.

"Come in and have a drink," Girdon invited from force of habit, and perhaps from desire to have his friend beside him.

"Thanks."

In the studio Slatterby's eyes fell upon Greta.

"Hallo!" he laughed. "Thought you were off to bed hours ago. Just an excuse to get rid of me, was it?"

"No!"

Greta almost shrieked the word. The two men looked at her in surprise. At once Slatterby sensed that something was wrong.

He'd been uneasy for the last hour. An impression had settled on his mind—a sort of premonition, if you like—so

Reading makes murder stories

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worrying that it had pulled him from his home and taken him round to the studio. Now it seemed that there were grounds for his unease.

Why were they up so late? Why hadn't Greta gone to bed after expressing her intention of so doing? Why was Lance looking like he was? Why had Greta flared up at his joking remark? There was something here that he didn't understand.

Girdon gave him his drink. Sipping it, he cocked up a quizzical eyebrow at the strength of the drink that his friend was mixing for himself. Suddenly Girdon laughed in mirthless metallic manner.

"This is probably my last whisky and soda in this world," he said. "At this moment the police are telling themselves that I'm the man who killed Carver!"

Slatterby stared.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he cried. "You didn't kill the young blackguard."

"I know. But the police will think I did."

"What do you mean? Carver was all right—er—afterwards."

He meant after Girdon's attack on him in the studio.

"Somebody smashed Carver's head in in the Passage," Girdon explained slowly, "when I was doing my tramp round, working off steam.

"I stumbled over him when I was coming home. I used my silver lighter to see who it was, and I must have dropped it there. I've not got it now, any way."

Then he told a horrified Slatterby the whole story.

"A sweet mess, isn't it?" he concluded with a laugh that wasn't good to hear.

"It's damnable!"

All this while Greta had been standing, a silent white-

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faced figure, looking from man to man. Now she spoke
"I think Lance ought to go away," she urged.

"I might just as well write out a confession!" he objected.

"I don't know," said Slatterby slowly. "I don't know. A little delay will give the police time for second thoughts.

"A young rip like Carver must have plenty of enemies. The police will find that out quick enough. He must have *one* anyway, because somebody killed him."

Of course, Slatterby told himself, Girdon might have killed Carver, in spite of his denial. His temper was tigerish, and he had nearly choked the fellow in the studio.

Mentally he shrugged his shoulders. Girdon was his friend and he was going to stand by him, thereby proving himself less heartlessly cynical than his books.

Ten precious minutes were wasted in argument. Greta and Slatterby allied themselves, and in the end Girdon agreed to go to a little place Slatterby owned at Hampstead in the Vale of Health, a secluded cottage behind high privet hedges and overhung by trees.

"If you keep indoors you'll be quite safe," Slatterby declared. "There's nobody living there. I let it furnished, and the last tenant left a week ago."

"All right," Girdon agreed at last. "I'll shove a few things in a bag, and then we'll be off."

Girdon went into the bedroom, and for a few minutes they heard him clattering about putting his things together. Then there came a silence lasting about a minute until he resumed his clattering.

When he emerged from the bedroom Girdon looked more disturbed than ever. Slatterby looked at him keenly. He seemed to be going to pieces. Strain, he supposed. Dammit, **he'd** feel like going to pieces himself in the circumstances.

"Well, let's be off," he said.

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An hour later Divisional Detective-inspector Forsyth was interrogating Greta. The officer was a stockily built man with a square, serious face and determined grey eyes.

He would have given a lot to know what was going on behind that pale mask of a face that was confronting him. To Forsyth, Greta was no less unfathomable than to others.

She was answering his questions in a cautious manner. She was sitting very still, almost immobile, speaking in a low, reluctant voice, when she did speak, and then returning the shortest possible answers, her dark, inscrutable eyes regarding him watchfully the while.

One white hand rested on the arm of her chair. From time to time the detective looked at it thoughtfully. He seemed to find it interesting. Well, it was a nicely shaped, long-fingered, delicately fashioned hand.

Perhaps that accounted for his interest; yet he did not look the kind of man to take an æsthetic interest in hands.

"When did you last see your husband?" was one of the questions he asked her, among others. There were a lot of others; some seemingly trivial, others perhaps important. To all of them she returned some sort of answer.

Forsyth found her annoying. Once he said: "You're not very helpful, Mrs. Girdon," in a peeved voice.

"Not if being helpful will help you to hang my husband!" she had flashed, coming fully alive for just that moment.

Then Forsyth produced an ebony silver-knobbed cane. The lower half of it was wrapped round with a band of paper. That half he extended to her. She took it in her hand, and looked at him inquiringly.

"Is that your husband's stick?" he asked.

She glanced at the heavy silver knob—most of which seemed to be covered by a reddish varnish—shuddered, and answered:

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"It might be."

Forsyth seem satisfied by this grudging indentification, and took the stick back again. He handed it to his detective-sergeant for safe keeping.

Next he produced a silver lighter.

He held it up for inspection.

"Does *that* belong to your husband?" he asked.

"It might," she admitted. "He has one."

To the detective-sergeant it seemed pretty clear that the woman knew that her husband had killed Carver, and that she was shielding him—or trying clumsily to do so. Presumably Forsyth held the same view. His next series of questions suggested it.

Then the telephone rang, and the sergeant answered it. He listened for a moment, said "Yes" several times, then: "Hold on."

"It's for you, sir," he announced.

Forsyth arose, crossed the studio heavily, and took the instrument. He yawned before he spoke; he'd been dragged from his bed after a tiring day.

As he listened to the instrument a look of surprise crossed his square face, and once he glanced at Greta who was staring moodily into the fire.

"I've about finished here," he said presently. "I'll come at once."

He rang off, and went back to Greta.

"That is all for the present, Mrs. Girdon," he announced. "There's no reason why you shouldn't go to bed. Some of my men will have to remain, but they won't interfere with you. They've finished in the bedroom."

Greta returned no answer. Forsyth and his sergeant went out, after the former had had a low-voiced word or two with the men who were to remain.

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The police car soon ran him out to the Hampstead Police Station on Rosslyn Hill. Here he found Slatterby, pale and worried.

Slatterby had received a severe shock. Girdon at that moment was lying dead in the mortuary, killed by his own hand. Slatterby had already made a statement to the police. Forsyth read it through before he joined him in the waiting-room.

Slatterby looked up when Forsyth entered and introduced himself, but did not speak. He wasn't any too sure of his own safety. There was a matter of finger-prints on a knife—his prints.

"I've read your statement, Mr. Slatterby," Forsyth said. "Do you mind giving me your finger-prints?"

He did rather, but there was nothing for it but to do so.

"Not at all. They'll correspond with the prints on the bone handle of the knife, but I didn't kill Girdon."

Forsyth took the prints by means of a pocket outfit he carried, and then went out and compared them with those on the knife-handle. When he returned Slatterby was lying back in his chair, relaxing with his eyes closed.

"They tally exactly," Forsyth announced.

"Of course, they're mine," Slatterby retorted, opening his dark eyes. "But I didn't kill Girdon."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"All right, but I've said it all in my statement."

"You said you and Girdon were walking over the Heath talking. Suddenly he darted into the gorse. You were so surprised that you stood rooted to the ground for some seconds before you followed him. When you got up to him——"

"He'd got the point of the knife resting on his chest, held by the fingers and thumb of his left hand. Before I could

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do anything—it was pretty dark, the only light came from the glow of street lights in the sky—he punched the top of the handle, like a chisel, with his right fist. He knew all about anatomy and where the heart is, being an artist.”

“Then how came your prints on the handle?”

“When he fell I took hold of the handle intending to pull out the knife. Then it occurred to me that if I left the knife in he might have a chance—stop the escape of blood. So I let go again, and then I saw he was dead.”

Forsyth nodded.

“I see. Well, I’m not disbelieving you. We found a letter on him that bears out your story.”

Slatterby’s eyes widened in surprise. This was something he had not expected. Forsyth produced a sheet of pale blue paper. Slatterby recognized it to be of the kind the Girdons used.

“As you were a friend of his, you might like to read it,” Forsyth said. Slatterby took it. It was just a line or two, but horribly to the point.

“I killed Carver. He had been annoying my wife. We quarrelled in the studio and I attacked him. I did not kill him then, but I met him in the Passage, and killed him then.—LANCELOT GIRDON.”

Slatterby handed the letter back to the detective.

“Poor old chap,” he said in a voice that was not quite steady. “He thought the world of Greta—his wife. I suppose he felt that he had no chance of escaping and took this way out to spare her as much as possible.”

As he spoke he was wondering when Lance had written the note. Then he remembered that minute of silence in the bedroom when the little sounds he was making as he

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packed had ceased. It must have been then that he had come to his tragic determination.

Outside the police station Slatterby had the good luck to find a taxi returning westward after setting down a fare, and had himself driven back to the Girdons' place. His face was set and stern. He had lost a friend, but tomorrow must do for grief. Tonight he had something to do.

He stopped the taxi at Earl's Court Underground station. He felt exhausted and his tongue was dry. He alighted and ordered the driver to wait for him.

Then, in company of a man and woman in evening dress, a railway-man and a fellow who might have been a bookmaker's tout, he drank two cups of tea. Afterwards he resumed his journey to Chelsea.

A light still burned in the studio, shining behind the pale blue curtains at its lofty windows. Slatterby rang the bell, and presently one of the detectives opened the door.

"I want to see Mrs. Girdon," Slatterby said. "Has she retired?"

"She's still about," the man answered.

"Then will you please tell her Mr. Slatterby wishes to see her? I'm an old friend, and I think she will be willing."

Greta made no difficulty about seeing him. He found her strolling aimlessly about the studio, smoking a cigarette through one of the long holders she affected. She looked up at his entry. Slatterby closed the door.

"Lance . . . is he safe?" she demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"Lance . . . is safe," he answered.

"They suspect him," she exclaimed. "I know they do!"

"Well, it doesn't matter," he answered dryly.

She caught the unexpected inflexion.

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"What do you mean by doesn't matter?" she demanded quickly.

"It doesn't matter. He's dead."

"Dead?" she echoed slowly. "I . . . don't . . . understand."

"Killed himself," he explained shortly, brutally. He wanted to see her reaction.

Well, he saw it. As the significance of his words became clear to her, her face suddenly lit up. For a moment it was the face of a person who sees approaching a long-desired consummation; but it was gone on the moment.

Slatterby, however, saw it. Saw it with a sudden sick feeling. Then he saw her force another expression into its place.

"How awful!" she exclaimed. "How . . . awful!"

For a minute he studied her, and her inscrutable, watchful eyes saw hate flame into his dark face. Saw inflexible determination grow, and she became afraid.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she cried in her fright.

"Why? *Well, why did you kill Carver?*" he flung at her like a cracking whip.

"Because I . . . he——" she answered. Then she saw what her words implied, and she was suddenly fear-struck, and sought to retract. "I . . . I don't understand at all what you mean!" she exclaimed.

But the effort was a failure.

"Why did you kill Carver?" he demanded again.

And now for once there was nothing unfathomable in her expression. There was only stark terror. The cigarette in its long holder dropped from her hand. Her mouth hung open. She shrank back appalled from his terrible, accusing eyes.

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Slowly, jerkily, her clenched hands came up and covered her trembling mouth, and over them her eyes burned.

She looked at him dumbly.

There was no mercy in his face. It was the face of a stranger. The face that had been always turned so kindly upon her was different. Had she misread its message? Had she——? He took a step towards her.

“For the last time: Why did you kill Carver?” he asked harshly. When she spoke it was not to answer his question, but to ask one of her own.

“Why did Lance kill himself?”

“I think he knew that you killed Carver, and he took the blame on himself. Lance loved you.”

“Took the blame . . . I don’t understand.”

“He wrote a letter confessing to killing Carver.”

With loathing he saw the joy sweep over her face, and the hope mantling in her eyes.

“Then I am safe!” she exclaimed.

Slatterby made a gesture of repugnance.

“We were walking over the Heath when he killed himself. He suddenly ran from me. I ran after him, but it was too late to save him. Just before he ran he threw away a piece of paper, screwed up in a ball. After he was dead, I searched and found it.” He took the paper from his pocket. “I’ll read it to you.”

He smoothed the paper out. “Listen:

“ ‘Dear Greta, I must have the money tonight. I shall be in the Passage at eleven-thirty waiting for you—and the money. I’d rather have the money than tell Lance what you’d hate him to know, so stump up. It’s your last chance.

HUGH.’

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"You kept that appointment. You lost your temper. You threw his letter in his face, and then you killed him. Having done that, all you thought of was getting away. You forgot the letter lying beside the body.

"Lance came along later, struck a light to see what he had stumbled over, saw it was Carver, and found the letter. He read it.

"It must have been an awful blow. He dropped his lighter in his preoccupation—probably he was unaware that he had done so—and came home."

She had waited impassively while he had reconstructed the crime with surprising accuracy, then she had her say.

"Now *you* listen!" she exclaimed. "I've always been faithful to Lance. The matter Hugh referred to happened before I married Lance. Hugh was a blackmailer, and I killed him. I don't think that is a very dreadful crime."

She tossed up her head and looked at Slatterby with defiance in her eyes.

"No . . . perhaps not," he agreed, for the first time softening a little towards her. Then he hardened again. "But why did you use Lance's stick?"

Greta studied him for a moment. Then an expression came into her eyes he couldn't fathom. It had calculation, daring, fear, all blended; but calculation seemed to be the dominant quality.

"Why did you use his stick?" he repeated.

She took the plunge, risking everything on a single cast.

"To throw suspicion on him," she answered.

"What!"

"I had done with Lance, too," she continued. "Our marriage was a failure. Lance wasn't the sort of man I wanted. I hated his temper. It frightened me . . . if he

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should find out about Carver, so I waited my chance. If he were hanged and Hugh dead. . .

"I made Hugh kiss me. I knew Lance could see us. I saw him in the mirror. I gambled on his temper. I nearly won, but not quite. Afterwards I killed Hugh in a way that pointed to Lance."

Slatterby drew a deep breath.

"Is that why you persuaded him to go away with me? To increase the suspicion against him?"

"Yes, it would have damned him."

Slatterby was looking at her with horror in his eyes, but, as her wide-open eyes searched his face she saw a change, a sort of reluctant . . . was it admiration? . . . expression came.

She took a step nearer him.

"I did it for you," she said softly. "For you, Jim . . . Jimmie!"

And now she was smiling. A soft, girlish appealing smile.

"For you, Jimmie. You love me, and I love you."

He started.

"How did you know?" he asked wonderingly. "I've never said one word about it. I've never even hinted . . ."

His voice trailed away in astonishment.

"I knew. I knew you wanted me . . . because I wanted you."

"Lord!" he exclaimed. He suddenly felt frightened. Later, he never related this part until he had passed his fourth cocktail.

"I recognized in you what was in me," she went on. "That told me. I loved you, and you loved me. Words weren't necessary."

"And did murder to get me!" he cried, more and more frightened.

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"I don't care! I wanted you, and you wanted me."

He did. He did. Before Lance had taken her. And afterwards he had still wanted her.

And now slowly she came towards him, placed her white hands on his half-reluctant shoulders, and looked hungrily, a little piteously, into his face.

The delicate perfume she used stole over his senses. He was always very responsive to the appeal of scent, and he could never resist a pair of pleading eyes.

"Did I do right?" she whispered. "Did I . . . Jimmie?"

"I . . . I don't know," he muttered, bemused by the appeal of her.

"Hugh has gone. Lance has gone. But we remain . . . free to enjoy each other," she said, tempting him. Her lips were parted, her dark eyes were soft and fond, a smile hovered on her face. "Free . . . Jimmie!"

His sallow hands came up and closed on the white ones that rested on his shoulders. For a minute he pressed them. Then he gently removed them, but he did not let them go.

He meant to. He meant to cast her away, but his southern forbears took control of him.

"My dear! My dear!" he exclaimed brokenly. He was drugged by her and his own desires.

She led him to a great chesterfield that stood before the fire. They sat upon it. In her moment of victory she did not forget that he still held Carver's letter.

He was thinking—he didn't know of what he was thinking—and he made no demur when she took the letter from him, and placed it in the fire.

"The only thing connecting me with the murder," she said.

They watched it blaze up, collapse, fall into pieces—she joyfully, he in a dazed sort of way. When it was quite

ROBERT LADLINE

consumed Greta ground the fragments with the poker.

"Safe!" she exclaimed exultantly. "Safe!"

With face aflame with the ecstasy of the moment, completely forgetting the price she had paid, careless of the blood upon her hands, she turned to him:

"Jimmie!" she thrilled.

It was at this moment that Slatterby began his great and losing fight with Duty; at least, he always says so after his fifth.

Minutes passed. Both of them were silent. A coal dropped out of the fire with a little clatter.

Slatterby glanced at the woman by his side. There was a queerly rapturous look on the face that was usually so unfathomable.

Her white fingers were loosely laced and resting on her lap. His eyes fell on her hands. Down the margins of the nails on her right hand there were curious dark lines.

He had never seen them before, and he had looked at her hands often enough because in an odd way they were to him the major part of her attraction. Whenever he thought of Greta, and that was often, it was her hands that he saw in the picture his mind created.

Now they were different, those lovely hands.

What were those lines. Were they . . . ? Suddenly he turned rigid (these are his own words when sufficiently junipered) and then he shuddered.

Were the lines Carver's blood? Blood that had spurted from Carver's crushed temple, blood that scrubbing and an orange stick could not completely remove?

He sat looking at them, and presently the lines began to spread until the whole hand, once so lovely to him, was covered by the stain, and now it was no longer dark, but a rich red.

ST. SLATTERBY'S TEMPTATION

Under his scrutiny she stirred and unlaced her hands, and held up the red one—and now the red was dripping . . . dripping off the edge of it, splash by splash. Blood drops.

At this moment (quoting Slatterby again) he realized that she was blood-guilty, that there was murder on her soul, and then before his eyes there shone as in a vision the word DUTY in flaming letters.

(If you switched the drinks from cocktails to whisky at this moment, and waited while the spirit did its work, Slatterby would expound at great length and with considerable eloquence how he wrestled with the devil and vanquished him.)

But it is necessary to say only that he sprang to his feet with a queer little cry of alarm. And in spite of her calling after him he ran from the room.

He poured out his story into the ears of Inspector Forsyth, whom he found in Greta's bedroom. Forsyth didn't appear to be at all surprised. He lifted up for Slatterby's inspection her long fur trimmed coat, a pair of brown shoes and a glove.

"She's cleaned them," he said, "but she's missed a few spots of blood. They always do. Her finger-prints are on the stick too—the ferrule end where she held it to strike the blow . . ."

Well, if Slatterby had written this story he would have called it: He sacrificed his Love on the Altar of Duty.

But his enemies, grinning behind his back, declare that all he did was to realize what kind of fate would probably overtake himself when Greta got tired of him!

Wood

BY

WILLIAM J. MAKIN

★

EVIDENCE IN CAMERA

"This is a very unusual request," said the affable film manager in his Wardour Street office. "The film is to be shown privately this afternoon. Very privately. Excepting myself and, possibly, four other people, the film will not be seen until the trade show in a fortnight's time. Can't you wait until then? I'll have tickets sent to you."

"I'm leaving for Africa next week," said the man with the sun-tanned face and obviously new suit of clothes seated opposite him.

"And you wish to be present with two other friends at this private view?"

"That is all I am asking."

The film manager drummed with his fat fingers upon the polished desk between them.

"What's the idea?" he flung out bluntly. "Are you thinking of appealing to the Censor?"

The man from Africa shrugged his shoulders.

"I've nothing to do with the censorship, Mr. Saxiss. I'm just a District Officer from the African bush who is, shall I say, very much interested in this film."

"There's nothing wrong with the picture," protested

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Julius Saxiss. "We called it *Wild Parade*—a good box-office title—and there is, perhaps, one duel to the death between a rhinoceros and a lion. I know some animal lovers are protesting about this, but these wild animal films have to be really wild to appeal to the public nowadays. You ask my assistant manager, Joe, here."

"Sure!" was all that the frock-coated individual standing by his side permitted himself to say.

The young man from Africa nodded thoughtfully.

"I've had to shoot a few lions myself, and I daresay one less in Africa doesn't worry anyone. But I want to attend this private view not because I'm a big-game hunter, but a man hunter."

"So!" exclaimed Julius Saxiss, rather bewildered.

"You see," went on the man with the sun-tanned face, "this film was not only concerned with the death of a lion and a rhinoceros. It had another fatality—the death of a well-known hunter."

"You mean Tom Clifford," nodded the film manager. "A sad affair, that. Badly mauled by a lion, wasn't he?"

"So your extensive publicity of this film *Wild Parade* says," added the young man grimly. "Tom Clifford happened to be a great friend of mine in Kenya. A better hunter and a cameraman didn't exist. And as the affair happened on my territory, near the Abyssinian border, a message was flashed to me from Nairobi. I trekked across country to verify facts."

"I'm sure no one was more distressed than Max Murren, the leader of this film expedition," sighed the Wardour Street man. "Believe me, when he returned from Africa and walked into this office he was in tears when he told me about the fatality. A good fellow, Max Murren."

"And so was Tom Clifford," said the young man.

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"Moreover, I'm certain there wasn't a lion in Africa that could ever get its claws into that big-game hunter."

"Maybe. But it's the thousand to one chance that gets us all in the end. Now, do I look the sort of fellow that would get lumbago? Yet I can assure you that for the past three weeks I've been suffering cruelly and . . ."

"At what time this afternoon will the private view of the film be held?" broke in the sun-tanned man.

Julius Saxiss looked pained.

"At three o'clock. But I'll just make certain."

He spoke into a desk telephone.

"Send Baker in to me."

Then, with a sigh of the worried man of big business, he turned again to his visitor.

"But you say, Captain . . . er . . ." (he looked at the card on his desk) ". . . Marchmont, that you personally investigated this sad affair?"

Again the District Officer nodded.

"I arrived on the scene three weeks after the film expedition had left for the coast. Yes, I found Tom Clifford's grave."

"Terribly sad," said the film man.

"Sad," echoed Joe in the frock coat.

"I also talked with the natives," went on Captain Marchmont. "Fine fellows, generally, but a little spoilt for the moment by the Birmingham trash which the film expedition had lavished upon them."

"Max Murren and my company never stint expense," said the film man proudly.

"So I gathered," said the District Officer drily. "But in the three days I spent in their village I discovered some interesting things. For example——"

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The door of the office opened. A shirt-sleeved individual stood there.

"You sent for me, Mr. Saxiss?"

"Come in, Baker," said the film man genially. "This is our project expert," he explained to Marchmont. "He'll be running off the film this afternoon." He turned to the shirt-sleeved individual. "Everything O.K. with *Wild Parade*, Baker?"

"O.K., Mr. Saxiss."

"What time is the private view fixed for?"

"Three o'clock prompt, Mr. Saxiss."

"And who will be present?"

"I can tell you that, boss," broke in the Assistant Manager. "Apart from ourselves, and, of course, Max Murren, the director, there will only be Sheila Lane."

"So Sheila is coming after all." nodded the film man genially. "Glad to hear it." Once again he explained to the District Officer. "Sheila Lane is one of our baby stars. This film *Wild Parade* was her first big part. She had a bad time in the jungle after Tom Clifford's death. She seemed to go to pieces. She's been in hospital—fever and such-like—ever since she came back from Africa."

"So Sheila Lane is the beautiful blonde I heard so much about," mused Captain Marchmont aloud.

"She isn't really a blonde," chuckled Julius Saxiss. "We made her one for this picture. One must have a blonde among black men. Ask Joe, here."

"Sure."

"Since she's been in hospital Sheila has become a brunette again. I think you'll like her, Captain Marchmont."

"I would certainly like to meet her," nodded the District Officer. "Then I may take it I can see the private view?"

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"Well, if it interests you," smiled the film man genially.

"And my two friends?"

"If you can vouch for them. We've got to be careful of trade spies, you know."

It was the District Officer's turn to chuckle.

"I think I can vouch for them," he said.

"Then we'll call it a date," said the film man briskly.

"Meet here at a quarter to three. Maybe you would like a little talk with Max Murren."

"I certainly would."

"Much in common, eh?"

And with a chuckle Julius Saxiss dismissed them all.

Only outside that lavishly decorated office did Captain Marchmont reveal his interest in the shirt-sleeved man who was to project the film.

"Baker," he said quietly, "I've half an hour to spare and I'm tremendously interested in picture projection. Got a little set of my own, you know, in Nairobi. Now I would like to see one of your five-thousand-dollar Wardour Street projectors."

"You would?" said the shirt-sleeved man enthusiastically. "Come along, sir, I'll show you a beauty."

It was a vivacious little group in that Wardour Street office that turned round as Captain Marchmont and his two friends were announced at a quarter to three.

Joe, in his frock coat, was dispensing cocktails, and the two ordinary-looking men who accompanied the District Officer promptly faded into his vicinity, leaving Captain Marchmont to be introduced to a slim, beautiful girl, Sheila Lane, and a big pepper-suited man, Max Murren.

"I've heard a lot about you, Miss Lane," smiled Marchmont, taking her hand.

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"From film fans?" she asked, raising her white face from beneath a big grey hat.

He shook his head.

"No, from black men," he replied. "I heard your beauty discussed in every kraal of my area in Northern Kenya. They call you the 'White Lily of the Jungle'."

"Nice of them," she said, with a little shiver, turning away.

"D'you hear that, Joe?" cried Julius Saxiss, his fat face wreathed in smiles. "'The White Lily of the Jungle.' There's a good publicity angle for you!"

"Sure," nodded Joe, his eyes on an array of bottles.

"But, of course, I heard about you, Captain Marchmont," broke in the gruff Teuton voice of Max Murren. "I was so sorry that we did not meet in Kenya. But I was told you were away on your duties, six hundred miles distant."

"I also was sorry we did not meet," nodded Marchmont. "Very sorry indeed."

"Still, better late than never, *hein?*"

"As you say, better late than never."

"A cocktail, Captain Marchmont?" interposed Julius Saxiss. "We like to launch our pictures well, you know," he added with a chuckle.

"Sparing no expense?" grinned the District Officer.

With a waggish wave of a fat forefinger, the film manager hurried back to the bottles.

Max Murren, drawing himself up, buttoned the pepper-coloured coat over his fattening girth. The District Officer knew him as a man who had exploited Africa with a cinema camera. He had heard those gruff, Teuton tones bellowing the excitements of big-game hunting through more than one talkie film. These film flamboyancies appealed to the town-bred audiences which had never seen

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a lion except in an atmosphere of sawdust and steel bars. They knew that Max Murren would give them their money's worth in blood and excitement.

"The most intrepid hunter with a camera of modern times" was how they billed Max Murren. And now the District Officer was meeting the owner of that gruff voice. Steel blue eyes, a high forehead, fair hair *en brosse*, and, for party occasions, a monocle clamped against his red face. But although an expensive cigar stuck out at a jaunty angle, it could not entirely conceal the cruel droop of the mouth.

"Julius was telling me that you were sent to the scene of our distressing tragedy by a message from Nairobi," he nodded. "Of course, I made a full report to the Governor himself as soon as I reached civilization."

"So I was told."

"Poor Clifford!" sighed the "intrepid hunter". "He was a man in a thousand. A great loss to our expedition, Captain Marchmont."

"A great loss to Africa," was the reply.

"I would have liked to have stayed there and talked with you on your arrival," went on Max Murren. "But, alas! I was not my own master. The picture was practically finished, and to keep to my contract I had to hurry to the coast. Sheila too, was in a bad state of health. I did the best I could for poor Clifford. We buried him decently."

"Yes, I saw his grave."

"I wish Clifford had never left the camp that morning," said Murren. "It must have been before dawn that he opened the flap of my tent and called out that he was going into the bush to photograph some lion. I was very drowsy, grunted out something, and let him go. Later, I had breakfast, and went out myself."

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"With a camera?" asked Marchmont.

The monocle glittered at him.

"No, with a rifle. I wanted to shoot something for the pot. The 'boys' had been complaining of a lack of fresh meat."

"I understand."

"Well, I came back about lunch time. Clifford had not returned. Apparently he was still out in the bush. I developed a few films in the afternoon. At dinner time, sunset, Clifford was still away in the bush. But I was not seriously concerned. After all, a night in the bush was nothing to Tom Clifford."

"Nothing at all."

"But the next day, when he was still missing, I went out with a party of 'boys' to search for him. Well, you know what we found. Poor Tom Clifford was lying in a clearing, dead. Half his shoulder had been eaten away. There were claw marks on his body. A ghastly sight!"

Sympathetically Max Murren took away his monocle and polished it. The steely blue eyes were dimmed with tears.

"Oh, why talk about the horrible business?" shrilled a voice.

Both men turned. Sheila Lane was standing there, her white face drawn and the dark eyes gleaming with horror. The District Officer could see the lines ringing them. Her slim body in the satin frock, one hand outstretched holding a cocktail, seemed tense with tragedy.

"Sorry, Sheila," said Max Murren, with a shrug of his shoulders. He took her possessively and led her to a chair. "Drink up, my dear. You'll feel better after it." Then he came back to the District Officer. "It gets each one of us like that every time we talk of it."

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Marchmont eyed them narrowly. Julius Saxiss and Joe were bending over the white-faced girl, consoling her. She was dabbing at her eyes with an absurdly small handkerchief. And Max Murren was obviously trying to control the emotion in his voice. He, too, was affected.

"But they're acting, film acting, every damned one of them," was the savage thought that twanged his mind.

"Let's go into the theatre," babbled the voice of Julius Saxiss. In a moment he had recovered his geniality. "Nothing like a picture for taking you out of yourself. What d'you say, Joe?"

"Sure!"

"Well, this way, gentlemen. Bring your drinks and cigars."

A little procession moved out of the Wardour Street office, along the corridor, and entered a room with some twenty seats, and a quarter-size screen facing them. It gleamed cosily with electric light. A square hole in the back wall revealed the shirt-sleeved man with his projector.

"Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen," said the film manager.

Marchmont slid into a chair next to Max Murren. The "intrepid hunter" was dribbling cigar smoke appreciatively from that cruel mouth.

"I think you said that Tom Clifford's death was a great loss to your expedition, Murren," murmured the District Officer.

"It was, a very great loss."

"And yet, in your report to the authorities at Nairobi," went on the District Officer quietly, "you mentioned no other loss."

The monocle swivelled towards him.

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"No other loss! Well, there wasn't. Losing one man like Tom Clifford was enough."

"But didn't you lose a camera, an expensive film camera—something like one I saw in Wardour Street to-day, priced at two thousand pounds?"

The man in the pepper suit hesitated. He gazed in irritated fashion at Julius Saxiss, who seemed to be having a heated argument with the shirt-sleeved projector man.

"I really can't remember," he replied testily.

"But surely you must remember a two thousand pound camera," persisted Marchmont.

"I can't, I tell you," his gruff voice shouted. "And what does it matter, anyhow?"

"Nothing," nodded the District Officer. "But I heard a curious story told by natives as I came near the district where the unfortunate accident happened. I was told that natives were worshipping a new god, or ju-ju, in the jungle, a god that gleamed strangely and straddled three legs in the long grass."

"Pah! These native legends."

"But this was true. When I reached the district I made it my business to seek out the gleaming ju-ju, the god that straddled on three legs. And I found it. And d'you know what it was? A camera, a movie-camera, hidden in the bush. A strange object to the natives. Naturally they had prostrated themselves and worshipped it. At night, they danced around it."

"It might have been left there by any film expedition," growled Max Murren. "Heaven knows, Africa is overrun with movie-cameras to-day."

"But not this district," insisted Marchmont. "And I could tell that this movie-camera was only three weeks abandoned. The natives confirmed it. Moreover, I was

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able to prove that it was the movie-camera used by Tom Clifford when——”

“I must ask for silence, gentleman,” broke in Julius Saxiss. “We’re going to show the picture now. O.K. Joe?”

“O.K. boss.”

The frock-coated man flicked off the lights. The room, the little group of men and the girl with the white, haunted face were blotted out by darkness.

A beam of light split the darkness. It was reflected by the screen. A flickering of shadows, and then, in bold, gleaming letters:

WILD PARADE

A Jungle Adventure in company
with the intrepid hunter
MAX MURREN.

“Got your name big there, Max,” chuckled the voice of Julius Saxiss in the darkness.

Then came a winding caption:

In the cruel sinister jungle of Africa stalk beasts of prey hungry for flesh, thirsting for blood. “Kill or be killed” is the law of the jungle. No Mercy is given: none is asked. Into this continent of murder, where death lurks in the long grass, trekked the safari of a man seeking high adventure with all the enthusiasm of youth

MAX MURREN.

“I like that, boss,” grunted Joe.

“You ought to. You wrote it,” was the reply.

Silence followed as the captions dissolved into a distant view of a safari winding towards the camera. Natives

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carried baggage on their heads, donkeys plodded patiently, and with the air of a Stanley in search of Livingstone, Max Murren headed the cavalcade.

He strode towards the camera. A close-up revealed him, sun-helmet shading the face. A sweating black with the air of a whipped dog waited his commands.

"How much further to the land of the lion?" came the raucous voice of Max Murren from his shadow-self.

"Twenty long miles, *bwana*. And there is danger in every mile. *Bwana*, must we go on?"

"We must go on," was the stern reply.

The native cringed out of the picture. Max Murren was left, his eyes narrowed towards that horizon of high adventure. He raised a hand and pointed. Obediently the cavalcade straggled past, slightly out of focus. That commanding figure dominated all.

"Good opening, Max," grunted Julius Saxiss.

Again the picture dissolved and the little group of men and one girl in the darkness saw the camp being prepared, defences erected against marauding beasts, close-ups of natives preparing the evening meal and then the sunset.

"Got that shot at dawn!" said Max Murren, with an uneasy laugh.

Soon *Wild Parade* was in full spate. A native spear hunt for lions was shown in detail. The lithe, black bodies poised tense amidst the long grass brought a queer feeling of nostalgia for Africa to the District Officer sitting there in the darkness of a projection room in Wardour Street.

Then, into the shadow screen, came Sheila Lane, beautiful and supremely confident. The slim legs were emphasized by the shorts that she wore. A tarai hat was curved to reveal the beauty of her face and the luminous eyes.

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"You look adorable, Sheila," murmured Max Murren in the darkness.

There was a little more confidence in his tone, but yet there came no answer from the girl in her seat. Instead, the raucous megaphonic voice of Max Murren was again dominating from the screen.

From the African bush he bellowed to the world the desperate adventure he was undertaking. They were going to face the wildest of beasts, with cameras only in their hands. The beautiful Sheila was revealed as a Society girl, tired of the dismal luxury round of gilded cities.

"I want the wind and the rain of Africa to wash me clean," she cooed to Max Murren outside a tent. "I want the sun to burn out the sins of the city from my soul. I want to forget the night-clubs, limousines, dance-halls, and the pawing of fat hands beneath the electric lights."

"Africa is a stern taskmaster," said Max Murren with an aloof air.

"I am not afraid," replied Sheila Lane.

They clasped hands.

The picture began to reel through adventures such as even during six years in the bush had failed to come the way of Captain Marchmont. A herd of wild elephants were seen lumbering across a swamp, Max Murren in grim pursuit. A rhinoceros charged him; he escaped. He dragged Sheila Lane away from horrible death as a black mamba coiled about a tree beneath which she had been sitting with a naïve innocence. His rifle leaped to his shoulder and spat death at a lion that was clawing the ground desperately preparing to leap.

"I'll bet Tom Clifford got that beast," murmured Captain Marchmont aloud.

"Our shots were simultaneous," admitted Max Murren.

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"But doesn't Tom come into the picture at all?"

"Wait, please!"

It was almost a snarl. The District Officer leaned comfortably back in his seat. Over his shoulder he was aware that the two friends were seated immediately behind.

"... And now I want to introduce to you a very gallant gentleman." The voice of Max Murren was again calling the cinema world. "One of Africa's greatest hunters and a real white man—Tom Clifford."

A rather sheepish figure, rifle dangling carelessly beneath his arm, shambled before the camera. A young, good-looking man obviously hating this particular part of his paid job. A brief nod and he was ambling away again from the camera. Despite the humiliation of the moment, it was undeniably Tom Clifford. The District Officer shivered at the uncanny realism of this walking ghost.

Not for a moment, however, had the megaphone voice of Max Murren ceased its panegyric.

"... But Tom Clifford knew the law, the remorseless law of the jungle: 'Kill or be killed.' Always there was death lurking in the high grass. Came one morning when he set off alone to seek the wild beast in its lair. We never saw him alive again. The beast killed him. His mangled body was found twenty-four hours later. He had died, fighting alone in the jungle..."

A low moan came from the seat where Sheila Lane was sitting in the darkness. The District Officer half rose. Then he heard the voice of Joe, the Assistant Manager.

"Drink this, honey."

"I'm all right now, Joe, really."

"Drink it, I tell you."

The film rioted into new scenes. The fierce fight to the

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death between the rhinoceros and the lion was shown to the accompaniment of snarls and roars.

"Took me a couple of days at the Zoo to fix up the sound track for that section," grumbled Joe.

"Good work, Joe," commented Julius Saxiss.

Then, reaching a crescendo, a bush fire was shown with herds of animals rushing pell-mell towards a river. Zebras, buck, giraffe, gazelles, elephant, rhino, wild cat—a whole menagerie in a wild *sauve qui peut*. It raised the little audience to enthusiasm, all except the District Officer, who murmured in the "intrepid hunter's" ear:

"That bush fire you started for your damned picture, Murren, left nearly a thousand natives on the verge of starvation. I had to deal with them on my trek."

"Pah! They were well paid."

"Even Africans can't eat beads," was the reply.

And so the film flickered towards the end. Once again the head and shoulders and voice of Max Murren were dominating the screen.

". . . So, with sad hearts, we broke camp that day. The great adventure was at an end. We had lost one of our brave companions. I let my eyes slant in the direction of that jungle where the law is 'Kill . . .'"

Like a cracked record the voice broke. But the film flickered anew. It changed with a startling suddenness to a clearing in the bush. A figure with a rifle dangling carelessly beneath his arm was ambling across the clearing with his back to the camera. There was no mistaking that figure. It was Tom Clifford.

Now that the raucous voice was still and only the whirr . . . whirr . . . whirr . . . of the projector could be heard, this silent film had an uncanny, ghost-like quality. Marchmont heard a gasp of surprise at his elbow. For the rest,

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this sudden change into silence had frozen them all into tense attitudes.

The figure on the screen stooped. It seemed to be listening. The man's head jerked back. He swung round. He was visible in profile. It was Tom Clifford. A look of surprise was in his eyes. And then, with startling suddenness, he crumpled up, pitched forward, the rifle sliding up, pitched forward, the rifle sliding from his arm.

A second later and another figure stepped on the screen. No mistaking the familiar appearance. Max Murren. And he held a rifle in his hand which he had just fired. The camera caught a gloating satisfaction as he gazed upon the prone body of the murdered man and——

"A curse upon him!" shrieked Max Murren from his seat. "He deserved to die. Daring to make love to Sheila. I'm glad I killed him. Yes, I'm glad I——"

"The lights. D'you hear, Joe?—the lights."

"O.K. boss."

Already the film had flickered to a dead end. And as the lights came on a strange scene was revealed in the projection room. The two friends of the District Officer were leaning over Max Murren and had securely handcuffed him. The "intrepid hunter" was snarling and struggling like one of the netted beasts in his own film.

"What does all this mean, Captain Marchmont?" asked Julius Saxiss, alarm upon his fat face. "I asked you to vouch for your friends."

"And I said I would," nodded the District Officer. "They're from Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard!"

"And I arrest you, Max Murren, for the wilful murder of Tom Clifford," said one of the two. "It is my duty to inform you that . . ."

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"Look after the girl," broke in Marchmont. "She's fainted."

They were back again in the film manager's office in Wardour Street.

"It was that three-legged ju-ju in the bush that really solved the crime," said Captain Marchmont. "I shall never forget its uncanny appearance, standing there in the tall grass, hidden by a clump of trees, and a group of half-naked savages mumbo-jumboing around it. It had stood there for three weeks and not one native had even dared touch it.

"I was nearly bashed to death by knobkerries when I went up to examine it. But those natives know me as the District Officer, and although they howled their protests, I opened the shining cabinet. I discovered a roll of film inside. This I carefully removed with its covering, packed it inside a tin trunk, and trekked to Nairobi with it. There I had it developed.

"For the most part, the reel was unexposed. But one small section had registered that scene which you saw this afternoon on the screen in your own projector room. I knew it told its own story, but in itself it wasn't evidence enough. I had to get a confession by surprise from Max Murren himself. That I arranged by bribing your projector man Baker—I hope you'll forgive him, Mr. Saxiss, but I more or less ordered him to fit that silent stretch of film into Murren's talkie version of *Wild Parade*—and also bringing two detectives from Scotland Yard to see the private view and, incidentally, catch any confession that might be blurted into the darkness."

"It's all very bewildering," moaned Julius Saxiss. "I don't know whether this is going to ruin me or make my fortune. What d'you say, Joe?"

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That frock-coated individual suddenly became loquacious.

"What I can't understand," he said, "is how that picture of the murder came to be taken."

The District Officer smiled.

"That was due to an ingenious contrivance which Tom Clifford had made entirely his own. Only a man who had hunted big-game with a camera could have thought of it. The camera was wound up to work automatically. From the camera there led a wire through the bush towards a trap area which, if trodden upon, would immediately start the camera working. Tom Clifford intended it for a beast. What he did not realize was that the murderer, Max Murren, who was stalking him with a rifle, would set the camera in motion as he knelt down in the trap area and fired as Tom Clifford turned."

"But why this murder in the bush?" asked the film manager.

"I think I can explain that," said Sheila Lane, slowly. She had been sitting in the office, white and shaken by the experience of the projection room. Her eyes still gleamed with the horror of that silent film.

"Tom had fallen in love with me. I liked him. Perhaps I liked him too much. I must have shown it, for Max Murren soon found it out. That man has an eye like a camera. Nothing can be concealed from him."

She shivered, but went on.

"Max had already decided that I was to marry him when we got back to Europe. He told me that the divorce from his third wife would soon be through. He behaved like a beast to me in the jungle. One night Tom found the man trying to force his way into my tent. There were no half measures about Tom. He took Max Murren aside, gave

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him a thorough hiding, and then sent him to his tent. It was early the next morning that Tom put his head into Max's tent and shouted that he was going into the bush to get some photographs."

Marchmont nodded.

"And a few minutes later Max followed with a rifle, stalking his enemy, determined on revenge," he added. "Oh, he was clever. None of the natives had witnessed that thrashing in the night. Tom was big enough to realize that it would do the discipline of the natives no good to know that two white men had quarrelled. And so, when Tom did not reappear, none of the natives suspected.

"Murren crawled after his man and shot him in the foul fashion that the automatic camera revealed. Max then cleared back to the camp, gambling upon the surety that some wild beast would come along and feed on the corpse. He gave the beasts twenty-four hours, and then set out with his search party. They found the body partly devoured. Any trace of a bullet wound was lost. And the body was already a skeleton when I reached the scene three weeks later. He buried it deep."

"And the movie-camera?" asked Joe.

"Had been so cunningly hidden by Tom Clifford that Max Murren never saw it. I'm inclined to believe that he even forgot all about it until the trek towards the coast had started. Then it was too late to go back. Even so, it never entered his head that the movie-camera would contain such damning evidence as would prove him a murderer."

"D'you mean to tell me that movie-camera is still there in the wilds, used as a ju-ju by those natives?" asked Julius Saxiss.

EVIDENCE IN CAMERA

"It certainly is," nodded Captain Marchmont, with a smile.

"Well, there's an angle for publicity, Joe. We can do something with that."

"Sure!"

"And now, don't tell me, Captain Marchmont, that I've got to throw this picture *Wild Parade* on the scrap-heap."

There was a pathetic helplessness about the film manager.

"I don't see why it couldn't be released, after the trial for murder of Max Murren, and, of course, without the silent version," ventured the District Officer.

A scream of joy came from the fat face.

"A fortune, Joe."

"Sure!"

They shook hands hysterically with each other. They hardly noticed that Captain Marchmont was helping Sheila Lane out of her chair and walking with her to the door.

"I think lots of tea in some bright restaurant in Piccadilly will do you a world of good," he murmured solicitously.

"You're very good," she said, a little shyly through her tears. "Didn't I hear that you were going back to Africa in a few days?"

"Do you know," he whispered, "I rather think I'm going to stay a long time in London. And now tell me, do you intend to make more films?"

She shivered and clutched his arm tightly.

"Never again,"

BY
G. R. MALLOCH

★

NINE POUNDS

I

Mr. Brown sat in the assistant-manager's room of the Universal Bank, staring at an envelope that had just been put on his table by a clerk. It was addressed to him in a neat hand with which he was familiar, and as he looked at it, he shuddered slightly. The letter had been lying there for a quarter of an hour and he had not opened it yet. He did not need to; he could guess what it had to say, only too easily.

This was the third time. And on the first occasion and on the second, they had given an undertaking that he would hear no more of it; each of the payments he had made had been a final payment against promised delivery to him of the fatally compromising thing these people had got hold of. For a year of torture he had lived in unspeakable fear.

It was nearly three o'clock. Through the glass doors of his room he could see the great hall of the bank, thronged with a constantly changing stream of people, the perspiring cashiers at the long counter with knots of late customers paying in or taking out money. Money—if he had all the money in the bank, probably it would not satisfy

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the human leeches who had fastened themselves on him.

He gave a laugh that was half a groan. Here he sat, one of the most respected men in the City, the trusted official of a great bank, dispensing thousands and hundreds of thousands or withholding them by a mere nod of the head; a man honourably engaged in great and useful work, a man of brains and knowledge; and there on his blotting-pad lay a note from an obscure scoundrel demanding money from him as the price of silence that would save him from public disgrace.

A silk-hatted bill broker opened the door sufficiently to allow him to thrust his head into the room.

"Any day-to-day money, sir?" he asked, breathlessly. He had been running. Mr. Brown glanced at the sheet of figures before him.

"You can have fifty thousand at two-and-an-eighth," he said.

"Right," said his visitor. "That squares me. Thanks awf'ly."

"Hi!" shouted Mr. Brown after the retreating figure. "What are you sending in?"

"Bank bills," shouted the other and was gone, running heavily. He was a fat man. As the door closed, the hum of voices and the clink of money against the cashiers' shovels in the hall were cut off again, and Mr. Brown was left to his thoughts.

That fellow Jones, for instance, head of a big firm, who came in every day and kow-towed to him and called him "sir", and was one of the greatest gossips in the City. He had been proud sometimes of the fact that he who began life as an errand-boy had attained the position of power in which he was called "sir" or treated like a friend by those

fellows, most of whom were men of birth, University and Public School men. He moved among them as an equal; they liked him, he knew that. It was something to be proud of, and he had been proud of it.

What would all these fellows say if they knew that the errand-boy, in a moment of madness and youthful folly, the result of drink and bad company, had forged his master's cheque? What would the directors of the bank say?—what would the shareholders, to whom he made a little speech every year thanking them for their vote of thanks to the staff, say? What a horrible, stupendous scandal it would make! The City would hum with it; the papers would get hold of it. It would mean absolute, irretrievable ruin to him.

A slight darkening of the great hall told him that the doors had been closed for the day. He could see the cashiers relaxing and exchanging conversation; colleagues came into the room; clerks followed them with papers; people spoke to him; a clerk placed a basket of letters and forms before him for signature. He answered absently, signed automatically. Surely he had atoned for everything? He had made himself a great and honoured career. Was he to be persecuted and bled white to the end of his life by a criminal, a blackmailer of the lowest order, a thing that preyed on decent men? There was his wife out there in their lovely house in Kent; his daughter, Joan, a wild, beautiful young thing on the verge of life and knowledge; young Marcus, his only son, up at Oxford, and looking forward to a great future of some kind. Were they to be sacrificed to this blackmailer? For his ruin would be theirs, and even if he were not exposed, the price of safety would be all the money that he had made and saved for them and most of his salary from the bank. The first time it

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had been a hundred; then two, now probably three. It couldn't go on.

He recalled the Sunday afternoon a year ago, when he had found a dark, hard-faced man with shifty eyes waiting for him in the library at home; and the gradual revelation that the stranger had something to sell to him that he had better buy. Long ago he had deliberately dismissed from his mind all recollection of his folly. He had been forgiven by old Perkins, to one of whose cheques he had added a nought, to pay debts and silence a loose girl with whom he had got entangled. The old man had been a friend of his father, which made his crime the worse; but he had wept over him and promised that the secret should remain with him. And he had allowed him to repay the nine pounds he had stolen. Nine pounds! For nine pounds, borrowed, as he had called it to himself, by a half-drunk boy who had got into bad company, all the fine edifice of his life was to be brought down!

The general manager came out of his room, attired for the street.

"By the way, Brown," he said, in passing, "the Board has decided to let Withers have that loan."

"I see, sir. I'll put it through."

"Thankye. Good day!"

"Good day, sir." He watched the figure of his chief passing through the hall, marked the respectful salutes he received, saw the senior commissionaire step forward to escort him to the waiting car. In time, if all went well, that man would be translated to the Board, and he might expect to take his place as one of the great financial powers. And because of that miserable nine pounds—what a boy's sum!—it might be for ever impossible. He could imagine the growing rapacity of his persecutors; from hundreds

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they would rise to thousands. He would be ruined financially and he might be exposed.

He continued to sign. Clerks came in with fresh batches of papers; but he was living that Sunday afternoon over again. The man had said his name was Johnson; he seemed incapable of looking you in the eye; his manner was a mixture of servility and threat. An envelope had been found among the papers of the late Mr. Perkins marked, "To be destroyed unopened at my death". Unfortunately it hadn't been destroyed—it had apparently been stolen in a burglary that took place at the old gent's house. And it had come, by sheer chance, into Mr. Johnson's possession. He had opened it the other day in going over some old papers.

What of it? Well, it seemed to contain some papers that he thought might interest Mr. Brown—a cheque that had been altered, a letter signed by him, and a memorandum by old Perkins.

No, he hadn't brought them with him; a friend of his had them, as a matter of fact. He was wondering if Mr. Brown could give him a little financial assistance; he had had business misfortunes. Well, say a hundred pounds.

What a fool he had been not to go to the police at once! But he couldn't bear the thought of anyone knowing of his lapse—not even the police. One result of the escapade had been to give him an exaggerated horror of anything savouring of dishonesty. From that moment he had been an upright, honest man; he couldn't bear to admit to himself that he had ever been anything else. He would get the papers and destroy them without thinking about them, and then it would all be finished. He paid the hundred pounds, and did not get the cheque and the letters—in-
stead, he got fresh demands for money.

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There were two of them in it—Johnson and his friend, a man named Baumgarten, an American crook. He knew nothing about them beyond the fact that they were blackmailing him, and had a small top-floor office in a building in a mean street on the outskirts of the City proper. He had been there once, to demand the incriminating papers, and they had laughed at him.

Now they were at it again, and they would go on as long as he lived. He must stop it somehow. But how?

He picked up the letter and put it in a pocket, unopened.

II

He left the bank early and resolved to go on foot to Victoria Station. He thought the long walk through the streets might cool his brain, in which all sorts of impossible ideas were whirling. The thing had got thoroughly on his nerves, he told himself, and he must get the better of it. Experience had taught him that there were no difficulties in life that cool deliberation could not abolish; if he allowed himself to get rattled, he would be done for. At present he did not see the solution, but there must be one. As for mad ideas about suicide, even disguised suicide, he couldn't do that—any more than he could commit murder. Murder? He shivered and turned pale, and shut his mind to the whole thing. He began to think about business matters as he strode along, outwardly calm, a well-dressed, prosperous citizen.

But when he reached the Westminster end of the Embankment and saw the buildings of Scotland Yard, an idea came to him. If he could find out something about these two men, it might make it possible to deal with them. He turned into the courtyard. Presently, he found himself in

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an upper room, facing a mild-mannered Inspector across a table. His card was in the officer's hand.

"What can we do for you, Mr. Brown?" asked the Inspector. "Nothing wrong at the Universal, I hope? I keep my little account with you."

"You needn't worry about that." He forced a laugh. "It's nothing very important, I'm afraid. The fact is, I've received a begging letter from a man named Johnson—I wondered whether it was genuine or whether you, perhaps, knew something about him here."

"Have you got the letter?"

"No—no—in fact, I tore it up. But it remained in my mind."

"Well, we know several hundred Johnsons," said the Inspector, patiently. "What are his Christian names?"

"He signs 'A. Johnson'."

"Not very illuminating, is it, Mr. Brown? But wait a minute." The Inspector looked at him thoughtfully for a moment and then left the room. Presently he returned with a file which he opened before Mr. Brown. He saw a portrait of his enemy.

"That's the very man!" The words were out before he realized his foolishness. He did not intend to give anything away to Scotland Yard.

The Inspector took the file round to his own side of the table and sat down.

"So you've seen him as well as had a letter from him?" he asked, carelessly.

"Yes—he came to my house first. I—I refused to help him; and then he wrote," Mr. Brown stammered, conscious of flushing under the Inspector's gaze.

"I see. Well, it's a new line for him. He's not a very nice gentleman, sir, and the less you have to do with him the

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better. If he writes again, better hand the letter to us. Johnson's a professional blackmailer. He's done time for that, for burglary, forgery, and dealing in dope. But writing begging letters is a new one—unless he wants your signature for a forgery."

"Dear me," said Mr. Brown. "I'm glad I came to see you. Luckily, as I told you, I didn't answer the letter." He began to fear that the police might raid Johnson and discover his secret.

"He works in company with an American crook named Baumgarten," went on the Inspector. "He's worse. Several murders to his credit in the States, as well as the usual."

"Murders?"

"One particularly brutal murder and several what you might call ordinary American shootings."

"Dreadful!" Mr. Brown rose and held out his hand. For some obscure reason he was glad to know that Baumgarten was a murderer. "Thank you very much, Inspector—you've put me on my guard."

The Inspector followed him to the door.

"You're quite sure we can't do anything else for you, Mr. Brown?" he asked.

"Oh no, thank you."

"No—er—discreet inquiries you'd like us to make?"

"Nothing, thank you, Inspector. Everyone gets begging letters, I suppose, at times."

When he had gone, the Inspector lay back in his chair and addressed the ceiling.

"Johnson and Baumgarten blackmailing Mr. Brown of the Universal—now what do you know about that?" he asked softly.

and bless
in each
step of life"

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III

When he left Scotland Yard, Mr. Brown did not go to Victoria Station to catch his train for home. What he had learned about Johnson and Baumgarten seemed enough to give him a chance of settling with these gentlemen once and for all. It was obvious that they could not stand exposure any more than he could. He had now a weapon to fight them with. He resolved to go to their office in the City and settle matters with them once and for all. If he had to go to the police for assistance he would go rather than submit to any fresh extortion; but first he would try the effect of a little plain talking. The more he thought of it, the more likely it seemed that they would be ready enough to hand over their evidence rather than risk arrest and the heavy punishment that was certain to follow. He would even be willing to make a last payment to secure what he wanted without revealing his youthful escapade to Scotland Yard. He had a nervous dread of revealing that to anyone, though he knew well enough that his secret would have been perfectly safe with the authorities. But he was sensitive to the point of folly: he could not bear to think that a thing which he hated to admit to himself should be known to anyone.

He went to the nearest telephone box, shut himself in, and opened the letter. It contained the usual polite request for a further remittance for business purposes. This time the amount was four hundred pounds. There was nothing about the letter to suggest that it referred to anything but an ordinary business transaction: it was neatly typed on ordinary business-letter paper, bearing the name of the bogus firm of merchants which covered the identity of his persecutors; it even gave a telephone number and a telegraphic address. Mr. Johnson's business was a big one.

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He called the number, and in a few moments the voice of Mr. Johnson, unpleasantly polite, inquired his business.

"Brown speaking. I received your letter and I'm coming to your office to talk to you about it," he answered, with equal suavity. The telephone people must suspect nothing.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Johnson. "Of course, we shall be glad to see you, but it's rather late and my partner has gone home for the day. I suppose you will bring the matter we require with you?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not, Mr. Johnson. I'm going to have a heart-to-heart talk with you about that."

"Oh, indeed!" There was a perceptible change in Mr. Johnson's voice. "In that case I shall want my partner to be present. But I shall have to phone him. Say in an hour's time, Mr. Brown. We shall be delighted to see you." There was an obvious threat in his voice.

"Very well—and I'm afraid it's the last time we shall have the pleasure of meeting each other," said Mr. Brown, and hung up the receiver.

He hailed a taxi and directed the driver to take him back to the City. He had no intention of giving his enemies time to prepare a trap for him or to concoct any new means of frightening him into submission.

Driving against the west-bound stream of rush-hour traffic, it took him half an hour to reach the end of the street in which Johnson's office was situated. He dismissed the taxi and walked the rest of the way. Most of the business premises were closed for the night and the narrow street was practically deserted; wisps of fog were closing about the few lamps that cast a feeble light on the dirty pavements. It made a mean and miserable scene, Mr. Brown thought, a fit neighbourhood for such people as Johnson and his partner.

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The building which he sought was an old house sandwiched between two warehouses. The front door was still open, and in the hall a charwoman was washing the floor; the staircase was lit by one gas-jet. The woman had her back to him and did not look round; he went up the narrow wooden stairs slowly, beginning for the first time to wonder whether he had not been rather rash to come here at this time of night to interview two criminals in a practically deserted building. The first floor was in darkness; evidently all the occupants had gone home. He reached the second and walked down a passage to the lighted door at the end of it, on which the name of Johnson's firm was inscribed in black letters on the frosted glass. It struck him that the place was uncannily quiet.

The door of the office stood a little open. That struck him as strange, and then he reflected that they probably wanted to hear him coming. But why should they? Was Baumgarten, the American crook, lying in wait for him, ready to take his money and silence him?

Such things did not happen in London! Nevertheless, he paused outside the open door and listened. No sound came from the brightly lit office within. Johnson was alone, then, probably. He pushed the door open and looked in. The little outer office was empty, and he saw that the door of the inner room also stood ajar. Apparently the place was deserted. Johnson, perhaps, had gone out to meet his partner; they would not expect him for another twenty minutes at least.

But Mr. Johnson was not out. When Mr. Brown pushed the door of the inner room wide open with his foot, he saw Mr. Johnson sitting at his flat-topped desk with his head on the blotting-pad in a pool of blood; one arm was flung across the desk, the other hung down by his side.

He was dead: of that Mr. Brown satisfied himself in a moment. And when the first shock of surprise was over, he suddenly became perfectly calm and collected. He was glad that the man was dead. He realized that he must get away, himself, at once; it would never do to be connected in any way with this matter. How could his presence here be explained? And if they found any papers affecting him, it would be explained in a sinister fashion enough.

But while he was here he might as well make sure that the things he wanted were not in this office. He glanced round the room. In one corner stood a safe and the key was in the lock. He stepped silently across and opened the iron door. Someone had been there before him, perhaps, for it seemed to be practically empty. He pulled open drawer after drawer; in the last of them lay a small packet labelled "Brown".

He tore it open and saw with an immense satisfaction the papers he was looking for: a faded cheque, his letter of confession, and a memorandum in the shaky hand of old Mr. Perkins. There was still a glimmer of fire in the grate: he laid them on a red coal and saw them burst into flame and consume into white ash. Then, without another glance at the figure at the table and without the slightest touch of regret, he tiptoed softly from the place.

The gas-jet still burned on the staircase, but the hall was empty; the charwoman had disappeared and the front door was closed. He opened it softly and stepped out into the street, leaving the door ajar to avoid making any noise.

He was glad to be out of it. He felt strangely elated. He was glad that Johnson was dead, and he knew that all evidence of his youthful crime had been destroyed. He was free for ever from the threat that had hung over his every waking hour for the past year. Fear had lifted from

*you are fool, you
should read novels*

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his life: his dear ones were safe now. That was all he cared about. As to how or why Johnson had met his terrible end, he was completely indifferent. He filled his lungs with the cold air and stepped out.

Suddenly the lights of a taxi appeared bearing down upon him. He slipped into a doorway and crouched against a wall. The cab stopped. He heard bargaining about the fare: the voice of the bargainer was the voice of Baumgarten.

But in a moment the taxi had driven away and Baumgarten had walked on. For some reason of his own, he had not chosen to be driven to the address he was seeking. Mr. Brown stepped from his concealment in time to see Baumgarten enter the building. He crossed the street and merged himself into a little hurrying group of workers on their homeward way. But in a moment he discovered that they were going east, which was not his direction. He turned, and realized, as he did so, that he would have to pass the building in which he had left Johnson again. And just as he was hurrying past, a policeman emerged from a shadowy gateway and began examining doors and windows with his lamp.

At the same moment a muffled cry rang out from the building opposite. The policeman stiffened into immobility. Mr. Brown paused with well-feigned hesitation.

"Hear that?" asked the policeman. He was staring up at the lighted window of Johnson's room.

"Someone up to a lark in one of the offices," suggested Mr. Brown. They waited, listening, for a moment; nothing happened.

"Well, I've got my train to catch," said Mr. Brown, beginning to move away.

"I think I'll go and have a look up there", said the policeman, "all the same."

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He swung ponderously across the road and disappeared into the building. Mr. Brown hurried along through various small streets till he reached a main road. He climbed into a bus. It seemed bright and cheerful and full of wholesome people; the pavements were crowded with hurrying workers, heavy trams rumbled along the wide road, brilliantly-lit red buses shot past them; life and animation were all round him. He had passed out of the shadow of fear and life held nothing but promise for him.

"Bank, please," he said to the conductor as he tendered his penny. He took the ticket, thinking of the scene in Johnson's room: the corpse, the astonished Baumgarten—and the policeman. Well, it was no affair of his. Pretty black for Baumgarten, perhaps, but his life was already forfeit, if the truth had been told at Scotland Yard. And with a deliberate effort of will he shut the whole affair out of his life for ever.

IV

Mr. Brown slept soundly that night and awoke with a strange feeling of release and happiness. He refused to think about the past, but he allowed himself to rejoice in the happy consciousness that a nightmare had been lifted from his life. The morning sun seemed brighter, his house seemed more spacious, the furnishing and decoration of it more exquisite. Before breakfast he went out into the gardens, now in the last glory of autumn, and it seemed to him that some renewal had come to him, that all colours burned with new beauty, and that trees and flowers had new grace that he had not perceived before.

At breakfast his wife and daughter remarked on his unusual brightness and chaffed him about it; he felt so happy that he could only smile at them and make idiotic jokes.

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Everything was going to be plain sailing now for them all: his wife was not to suffer, his children were to have everything that he longed to give them. All the happiness that he had so nearly lost was still his, enhanced a thousandfold by the danger he had passed through; all his inanimate belongings that symbolized it had become infinitely precious to him. He felt a strong affection for the shining car that took him to the station; he revelled in a conversation with the station-master about politics. Never would the stationmaster's eyes be darkened by suspicion or contempt, never would anybody's that met his.

And in the train, in the seclusion of an empty first-class carriage, he opened his morning paper and saw set out in staring headlines the story of Johnson's murder and the arrest of his partner, who had been found standing over the body.

He reached the bank and set about his work with a light heart. But everyone with whom he came in contact wanted to talk about this murder of a City man and the strange circumstances connected with it. Why should Johnson's partner have killed him? There was no motive, and his story that he had come back to the office after receiving a telephone call and found his partner dead might be a perfectly true one. Was it true that the partners were a pair of crooks? Blackmailers, some people said. And they insisted on discussing the case in every aspect.

"Just picture to yourself", said the fat Mr. Jones, "the situation of a man who finds his friend dead and is discovered by a policeman beside the body, before he has had time to give the alarm. And mind you, the man had naturally shouted out on finding the body, and the policeman, as naturally, takes his shout as the victim's. Very awkward for the most innocent man in the world, I should say."

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"But they say the fellow's a bad hat, anyhow," said Mr. Brown. "I've heard that he's a murderer who only escaped the death penalty in America by flight."

"Well, even so," objected Mr. Jones, "if he didn't commit this particular murder, he shouldn't hang for it. A chap may have made a bad mistake in the past—if he gets away with it and makes good again, it's hard lines to drag that up against him, isn't it?"

Mr. Brown kept remembering these words all day. Various uncomfortable ideas were started by them, he kept on seeing the unhappy Baumgarten trapped there, with the dead body and the suspicious policeman. If a man hadn't committed a murder, it couldn't be right to hang him for it, no matter what he was. But they couldn't—there was no proof.

The evening papers contained a story from the man who occupied the adjoining office. He had overheard a violent quarrel between Johnson and Baumgarten on the morning of the day of the murder. That was enough to hang Baumgarten, said a man in the train, with an air of satisfaction. Mr. Brown kept seeing a haggard Baumgarten, trapped at last, no doubt deserving death, but not for this. He saw from his paper that there was a Mrs. Baumgarten and two children. She declared that she herself had taken the telephone call from Johnson's office. They could easily fake that, said the other passenger. Mr. Brown sat back in his corner in silence for the rest of the journey.

When he stepped out of the train, things seemed a little changed. The stationmaster, hurrying past, gave him a hasty nod and went on; he seemed flurried and not so cordial as in the morning. Mr. Brown surveyed his waiting car with dissatisfaction—it did not seem so well-polished as it might be. He said so, and his man gave him a sur-

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prised and hurt look. He got in and sat huddled in one corner. The road was muddy and dirty-looking, the country did not look so spacious and entrancing as it had done. As they swept through the gates he noticed that the lodge needed painting; the house itself seemed to have shrunk; his wife's greeting was absent-minded; nothing seemed the same. A feeling of depression settled on him, and he strove against it in vain. At dinner they would talk of the City murder. He kept on seeing the foxy-looking Baumgarten trapped in a cell, walking up and down.

It was no affair of his! He had not murdered the man. Surely he was not bound to go and dip himself in that mud, implicate himself, raise all sorts of suspicions and almost certainly bring out the whole story that he must conceal, simply because he had seen the dead man first? He might be accused of the murder himself—certainly he would be. There was motive enough in the story of blackmail. How could he account for his visit to the office without revealing everything? And then ruin, utter ruin, for him and for them all! No—his first duty was to himself, that was clear enough.

And yet it was not quite so clear in the morning, when his daughter said at breakfast:

“If anybody knows the truth and is letting them hang that man, no matter what he has done, it must be a pretty mean skunk.”

Baumgarten appeared before a magistrate and was remanded, affirming his innocence passionately. He admitted that he was a crook; but he had been fond of Johnson, who had once saved his life. Johnson knew that he would never have killed him.

But what did it really matter to the world, asked Mr. Brown, whether Baumgarten died for this crime or another?

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He was a murderer, anyhow, and better out of the way. Was he to sacrifice his children to save Baumgarten? To mix himself up in it at all would be sheer madness and a crime against his own family.

Two days later, he went to Scotland Yard and asked to see the Inspector with whom he had talked on his first visit.

"I thought that perhaps we should be having a visit from you, sir," said the Inspector, politely.

"Why?"

"Well, you had been getting begging letters from a man named Johnson and it seemed likely that he would go on worrying you, that's all," said the Inspector. "Do you know that it was the same man who was murdered the other day?"

"Yes," said Mr. Brown, resolutely bracing himself to say the thing that would probably ruin him and put an end to his career. He was dimly aware that the Inspector was studying him keenly. "Yes. It was about that I came to see you. I think you've got hold of the wrong man, Inspector."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes. You see, I was in Johnson's office ten minutes before Baumgarten arrived. His story is true. Johnson was dead when he got there."

There was a moment of silence. Mr. Brown was surprised that the Inspector did not lean across the table and handcuff him, or ring a bell for someone to take him into custody. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and nodded.

"Ah," he said, reflectively. "that explains one point that puzzled me—how your finger-prints came to be on the safe."

"How did you know they were mine?"

"Well, sir, perhaps you remember a talkative stranger

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in the train the other day who handed you a letter to examine? We got them on that sheet of paper, which was prepared for the purpose."

"Then why didn't you arrest me?"

"Because I was pretty certain that you hadn't killed Johnson. But, if you'll forgive me, one never knows, and it was necessary to follow every clue. And as you've been plucky enough to come here in the circumstances to clear Baumgarten, I may as well tell you that Baumgarten didn't do it, either. But we had to take him and test his story. You see, you're not very good at deception, Mr. Brown. It was perfectly plain to me, when you first came here, that Johnson was blackmailing you, or about to do so."

"He was—and after what you told me, I went straight to his office to tell him that I would stand no more."

"I thought so. And you found him dead, and searched the safe for whatever it was. I hope you found it?"

"I did."

"And burned it in the grate," pursued the Inspector. "Well, no matter, we don't want to know what it was. The truth is that Johnson killed himself."

"You mean that he committed suicide?"

"Just that. What so many writers of detective stories seem to forget is that crooks are human beings—they catch measles and suffer from indigestion, just like the rest of us. This one had cancer—cause one. Cause two was that he had been swindling his pal Baumgarten, and Baumgarten was going to find out, if you—that is, if he didn't get a certain sum of money on the day he died. I suppose that he was in great pain, and fear of Baumgarten was just the last straw—anyhow, he shot himself in the head."

"And how do you know that?"

"You didn't notice that the window in front of his desk

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was wide open? Well, it was, and that was how Baumgarten's cry of fear was heard by the constable and you—it was you, I suppose?—so plainly. Well, when he shot himself and pitched forward, the revolver flew out of his hand, probably when his elbow hit the table, and went out of the window. It was caught in a gutter, where I found it yesterday. The only finger-prints on it were Johnson's own. And as everything points to a self-inflicted wound, Baumgarten is all right."

"And he has told you, I suppose, why I was being blackmailed?"

"He didn't know—that was Johnson's secret, he says, and I believe him. Johnson was too cunning to give it away. You'll never hear anything more about that. I dare say it's a relief to you, sir."

"It was a boy's fault, Inspector, and nothing in my life since justified the agony I might have suffered from these men."

"Well, all I know, and all I want to know, sir," said the Inspector, with a smile, as he held out his hand, "is that you came here to land yourself in the devil of a mess just because you knew that a murderer was guiltless of this particular murder. Take it from me sir, you can regard that as cancelling everything, whatever it was."

Mr. Brown walked out of the shadows of Scotland Yard into the brightness of the Embankment. The sky was blue, the sun was shining, gulls were wheeling over the river. His heart was full of gladness, but he found a thought to spare for the misery of men to whom the world could never look like this, who could never look their fellows in the face without fear at their hearts. And when he thought of the current glorification of criminals and the sentimentalizing of crime, he laughed aloud. Their world and his—what a gulf lay between them! Poor devils!

BY
DOUGLAS NEWTON



THE HOLE IN THE HAYSTACK

Ignatius Garthoyle was not thinking of crime or the prevention of crime; the strange young man with the snow-white hair was taking a holiday.

He was walking without set plan along the high ridge of the Downs. On the second day of his tramp he came to Balder's Ring, that queer, sudden clump of trees standing out like a single, startling forelock on the naked forehead of the hills.

Balder's Ring, the experts say, was an observation post and fort for the ancient tribes long before the Romans came, and Ignatius Garthoyle as he approached it noted how admirably it was placed for such functions.

The trees rise from an artificial mound, flung up in the ages before written history, on the very top of the high hills. From their shadow a man can look right down on to a dozen villages and a score of big houses in the Weald, six hundred feet beneath. He can also watch the whole crest of the Downs in any direction.

Moreover the trees which are thin enough not to impede the view of such a watcher are yet thick enough to allow such a man—or even a party—to escape un-

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observed by anybody approaching distantly from any side.

An ideal place for the meeting of conspirators was Ignatius Garthoyle's reflection, which was queer because he had not seen the cigarette ends then.

Panting up the steep exterior slope of the mound he threw himself down in the deep saucer-shaped depression that forms the inside of the ring to recover breath. A few minutes later he saw the cigarette ends.

What first attracted his eyes to them was their extraordinary number.

They were across the hollow from him, near a small uprooted pine that had long ago been dragged into the hollow for use as a seat. From where he sat the many tiny patches of cigarette paper glinted on the green of the short downland grass like a handful of confetti thrown upon a billiard table.

A conference of inveterate chain smokers must have held an endurance contest over by the pine, he thought.

He went across and counted nearly one hundred and twenty cigarette ends before he became bored with addition. Allowing ten minutes for a cigarette it looked as though ten men had sat here at least two hours in smoke and talk. Only that there were none of the evidences—paper or fragments—that are the inevitable relics of even the mildest form of a picnic meal.

Queer that a group of men should come to such a place to talk. Queerer that every one of the ten must have been a cigarette fiend. Many Englishmen are heavy cigarette smokers, but it did not seem quite natural that the whole ten should have been of that breed. If they had been foreigners——

Ignatius Garthoyle stooped and closely examined the cigarette ends—and the answer was foreigners.

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The cigarettes smoked had been of marked variety. There were three kinds of Russian; two of the half-tobacco, half-stiff paper tube kind, one of the brown-tinted paper peculiar to some kinds of Russian cigarette, the same paper being on one of the half-tube kind. Then there had been a cigarette of black Braganca tobacco, which is South American, in rice paper, and another of the same tobacco in Indian corn husks. A man had smoked French Caporal cigarettes, while the largest group had used those cigarettes which are bought ungummed but tucked in at the top and bottom so that smokers can re-roll to taste, it is a type of cigarette very common in the Mediterranean, and found particularly in Spain.

There was not one machine-made cigarette of "sweet" tobacco, that is light-coloured Virginian, among all those ends, and that was startling. It is possible that a few English smokers out of many might have a taste for foreign tobacco but that ten of them in one group should have that taste was not a probability.

Ignatius Garthoyle had no doubt at all that a group of foreigners had met here to discuss something, and that foreigners should choose this strange, lonely spot on the top of the English downs struck him as remarkable. His instinct so trained to read the significance of trifles was at once alert.

A careful survey of the ground gave him only one more pointer.

One of the men who had sat on the fallen pine had played idly with his knife as he listened to the talk. He had sharpened it on a stone, he had stabbed deeply into the tree, he had shaved strips off the trunk.

Not only had that knife been razor sharp, it had been handled by a man of great strength and cunning. A num-

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ber of the most delicate shavings were on the ground under the tree. They were shavings of paper thickness and great breadth. Ignatius Garthoyle found that one measured seven inches across.

That meant a knife of extraordinary length, and an examination of the trunk told what sort of knife it was. The man had driven his knife a little too deep in his last cut, and had had to tear off the shaving to release it. As a result the end of the cut was a perfect outline of the cutting edge of the knife, and it was undoubtedly one of the villainous weapons curving back towards the point which the Spaniard or South American uses for fighting.

While making these observations the rain, which had been threatening all the afternoon, came down in good earnest. Ignatius Garthoyle, who had meant to walk on to the town of Stripe, was forced to go down into the Weald to the small village of Balder. He was not sorry, his curiosity had been keenly whetted by what he had found in the Ring, and he wanted to learn a little more about these foreigners.

He learnt nothing. Neither the people of the inn where he took a room for the night, nor the villagers who came to the bar during the evening, knew of any foreigners in the district, and that made the matter stranger. It is not easy even for one unusual person to pass through a village without attracting attention, as those who live in small villages know.

However, intriguing though the matter was, it was also baffling, and there being nothing more to discover, Ignatius Garthoyle continued his tramp the next morning.

Anything in the shape of a cigarette end was now bound to attract his attention, so that when he noted a group of cigarette ends under a tree it was not altogether an acci-

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dent. He was making his way through the fields by a foot-path towards the slope of the Downs when he saw the cigarette ends. The tree was only a little way from the path, with the sun on it showing up the ends brightly.

The cigarettes had been of the Indian corn husk variety he had found in the Ring. They indicated that the smoker had been at this point all night. Not merely their numbers proved this, their condition did, too. Some had been beaten open by the rain that had fallen through the evening and well into the night. Others were undamaged, showing that the man had still been there when the rain ceased.

That was not all. The man who had been there and smoked for such a length of time had not stood under the tree. There was no sort of trampling on the ground which there should have been after so long a stay and during rain, too. Yet the cigarette ends were on the ground, declaring that the man had not only been there, but had scarcely moved during the night.

Since he had not spent the night on the ground, he must have spent it in the tree itself. Ignatius Garthoyle climbed the tree and found it to be so. There was an easy crutch in the branches where the man had sat, and a number of little dabs of cigarette ash on the branches about that showed that he had extinguished cigarette ends by pressing them against the branches after he had lit a fresh cigarette at the lighted end. He would not use matches in such a position.

Further evidence proved not only that the man had been there, but who he was. He was the man with the ugly stabbing knife. He had relieved the monotony of his vigil by stabbing into the stout branches near him; the depth of the holes in the wood told what an ugly and dangerous brute this watcher would be to tackle.

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What was the watcher's business here? That seemed plain enough. From this point of vantage Ignatius Garthoyle could look across a hedge over a home park to where a fine old ivy-clad Jacobean house stood square to his eyes. Sitting here at night he would be able to study the lights in every window and note when they were extinguished. More, if he had a pair of field-glasses he would probably see much that went on in the lighted rooms, for many of the windows were not curtained.

The watcher then had spent the night studying the habits and conditions of those living in that house.

Ignatius Garthoyle did not continue his holiday tramp. A matter that concerned the secret meeting of a gang of foreigners and the stealthy prying of a knife-man meant something ugly, he was certain, and it was his hobby to look into such things.

He did not return to Balder, but took rooms in Hern's Ghyll, the next village along the road to Stripe, and the one nearest the big house. There he had no difficulty in learning that the Jacobean mansion was owned by Admiral Magran, who, though not at that moment in residence, was expected to come down with his family in three days. His family consisted of his wife and two children, a girl of fifteen, and a boy of about ten.

He found nothing to connect the Magrans with sinister affairs, nor did he hear a word about the foreigners.

Even Ignatius Garthoyle's queer faculties had never faced a stranger business. Up to now he had often been able to foresee a crime by watching the faces of prospective criminals. Now he had not even set eyes on them, yet he knew that some sort of felony was being planned.

He caught the motor bus into Stripe and bought seven yards of stout rope. He wished to get out of his inn without

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causing any comment. Having prevailed upon his chambermaid to open his window and leave it open—a fact that told her that he was a city man and unused to hermetically sealed country ways—he put his rope out of the window that night and slid down to the road outside.

At 11.30, which is the absolute dead of night in the country, he was working his way along the hedge surrounding the Magran grounds. He did not have to go as far as the tree in which the watcher had spent the night. The sound of stealthy movements led him towards a small haystack over the hedge in the grounds. Creeping close up, thanks to the cover afforded by a small bunch of silver birch, he was able to discover two men at work there.

He could not see them because of the hedge, but from the sound they were occupied in cutting a hole into that stack. A strange occupation. It was made stranger by the fact that they were cutting it at a place where the stack came close to the hedge—so close that the backs of the men were in the hedge as they laboured, as the rustling of the branches told.

A hole in the stack at such a point would make an admirable place of concealment. Nobody would ever think of squeezing round by the hedge to look for it, or indeed trouble to force their way along between hedge and stack for any reason. It was, Ignatius Garthoyle recalled from his daylight observation, a very new stack, and so would be left alone for a long time.

Yes, an admirable place of concealment, but what was to be concealed there? And who were the men making such a place of concealment?

The latter point was soon answered; one of the men whispered in that curious sing-song English that proclaims the Russian: “Is it not deep enough, now?”

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"*Si, tres metros,*" began the other man, and reverted to English, apparently because his companion did not understand Spanish. "Quita 'nough, now. 'Bout six yard. It would do."

"Very well it will do," said the Russian. "It is a most luckily good place. No one will dream of looking here."

"No," said the Spaniard. "It is quite safe from all eye, an' will be so for longer than the time we wanta it, *si*."

"An' it is good in every way," said the Russian. "A new stack, hey, an' just about warm enough, hey?"

"That is so, it is in every way good," grunted the Spaniard, and he gave way to his race's love of proverbial sayings: "Good money demands good work."

"H'mm," grunted the other. "But is our money so good as it ought to be? We are the ones who will take the risk. I do not think we are getting the fair part of what the Reytens has paid."

"Money that passes through many hands loses weight," said the Spaniard stoically. "There, I think that it is covered well enough. You have packed the straw we have taken in that sack? Come then."

The words came so sharply that Ignatius Garthoyle, who usually moved as silently as a ghost, took a startled step to get into cover. He tripped on something, half fell and, though he saved himself by clutching a tree, the force of his movement shook the tree and the bushes into a rustle that sounded painfully loud.

He heard a soft exclamation from the Spaniard, and, looking over his shoulder, saw the bulk of a head and shoulders loom above the hedge. There was a sudden queer sound like a soft "phutt", and something embedded itself in the slack of Garthoyle's coat. There was another of the soft "phutts", and something just nicked the forefinger of

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the hand still holding the birch, and smacked sharply into the tree itself.

He looked and saw a slim feathered dart sticking into the tree. At the same moment his finger began to smart inordinately.

It happened in a flash. Before another of the darts could be sped on its way, Ignatius Garthoyle had ducked silently, and with all his caution had begun to move swiftly away. He did this with all the cunning of which he was the master, moving first towards the roadway, then doubling back so as to get behind the men when they entered the birch copse.

And as he went he sucked and sucked frantically at his grazed forefinger. He had connected that "phutt" with the Spanish-speaking man. That man had used a blow-pipe, the silent, effective, deadly weapon of Spanish America. And since that was so the darts were probably poisoned with that paralysing poison called curari.

His luck was with him. Working round the birch copse he came to the boundary hedge again; more, he found there a hole through which he could crawl. He actually did crawl through into the Magran grounds at the moment when the ruffians crawled out of them through a hole lower down by the copse. Creeping along he reached a haystack just as the two men among the birches were taking their bearings from the top of the glade in their search for him.

"He was about here," said the Spaniard.

"Yes, this would be the place—if it was anybody. I think it was the wind in the trees."

"It was a man," said the Spaniard. "I saw the white spot of his face. You will see we will come on his body."

"And infernally inconvenient that will be," growled the

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Russian. "What are we going to do with such a thing at this stage of our work?"

"Better he should be dead than alive to tell of us," said the Spaniard. "We should be able to hide such a corpse for a few days, anyhow."

The corpse, at that moment, was putting the final twist into a rough tourniquet above the wrist. He had fashioned it out of a piece of string he had in his pocket, and used a pencil as the turnscrew. His hand was throbbing in a very painful manner, but he was praying that the smallness of the scratch—it was no more than a nick—the vigour with which he had sucked at it, and the tourniquet would prevent further harm. The pain, anyhow, did not seem to be travelling beyond the wrist.

The Russian was saying: "Your corpse is hard to find. Are you sure there must be one?"

"But, yes," said the Spaniard, if doubtfully. "I shot two darts at him. I do not make mistakes when I shoot—nor do those darts. They mean death, my friend, when they hit. If he was here we should find his carrion."

"You begin to be doubtful," said the Russian. "I have thought the sound was merely the wind all along. Ah, here is your dart. See, sticking into this tree-trunk. Note the whiteness of the bark. *That* is your face. When the wind stirred the bushes across it it looked as if it moved."

"But I feel certain it was a man," said the Spaniard, shaken.

"And yet where is he—or his corpse?" asked the Russian. "Come, confess, those white trunks deceived you?"

"It may be so," said the Spaniard slowly, after a time. "I am not used to conditions in this country—and certainly if it was a man his body should be here. I do not miss ever."

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It was undoubtedly to the Spaniard's certainty of his gift for murder that Ignatius Garthoyle owed his life. The man not finding a body was sure he had made a mistake, and the two men went off, not to the road, but up towards the Downs. How near he had been, perhaps was, to death, Ignatius Garthoyle found when he had to climb back to his room at the inn. His left hand was by that time in a shocking state, and it was only after great efforts that he got back through the window at all.

He spent a terrible night, only grateful that the poison had not spread, after all, beyond the tourniquet. About midday next day a doctor in London told him that the tourniquet, together with the fact that the wound had been too small to introduce much of the poison into his system, had alone been the reason for saving his life. Ignatius Garthoyle was afraid that he had swallowed some of the poison in sucking the wound, for the need of silence had prevented him spitting it out heartily. The doctor told him that there was no need to fear danger from that, for one of the queer things about this South American poison curari, is that it can be swallowed without hurt, it is only when it is introduced into a wound that it is dangerous.

This doctor examined the queer, slim dart that had stuck into Ignatius Garthoyle's coat, and said there was enough curari on the point to kill half a dozen men.

Ignatius Garthoyle went back to his rooms, and after telephoning a full report of the happenings to Inspector Tim Lever of the C.I.D., rested his rather tired body on a couch. Three hours later Tim Lever found him in the same position, though he had recovered enough to be studying his inevitable mass of reference books—including *Who's Who*.

After expressing his sympathy, Tim Lever went on to tackle the matter with his usual breezy dash.

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"Looks as if you were on to a pretty hefty thing, I. G.," he cried. "No doubt about what it's all about, and that it's big."

"So you know all about it already?" smiled Garthoyle.

"Well, even you can't make one of your darnation riddles out of this," laughed the inspector. "The matter is written up as large as an advertisement on the hoarding. First, it's a pretty desperate business, that murdering knife-man and the way he was ready to wipe you out at a moment's notice shows that. Then there's this foreign element which you've demonstrated: all those alien cigarette ends, the secrecy of the gang, the foreign murdering methods of that knife-man, the name Reytens, which is foreign; finally the marked *Russian* aspect. Russian cigarettes, a Russian at the stack, Russia is the point to mark."

"Ah, that tells you something, Tim?"

"Does it *not*!" said Tim emphatically. "It connects things up with a click. Do you know who Admiral Magran is? But, of course you do, you've got *Who's Who* on the table beside you."

"I know he's a brilliant fellow; he writes and lectures on naval strategy, he's on the active list, is employed at the Admiralty, and that he is married to——"

"Stop at the Admiralty part," smiled Tim Lever. "That's all we need to consider. Seems that for once you don't know *all* the facts, I. G. It's Admiral Magran's connection with the Admiralty that counts here. He's one of the group concerned in dealing with future strategy. That is, he helps to draw up the plans for any future naval action in the event of any future war. *Any* future war—now do you see it, I. G.?"

"I never do", smiled Garthoyle, "until I come to the end of the case and there is something to see."

"But this is plain to any eye," protested Tim.

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"Nothing ever is," said Ignatius Garthoyle, "until it has built itself up to a definite act of crime."

"But there's no getting away from it this time," said Tim calmly. "How else can you connect up aliens, particularly Russians, with an admiral actively concerned in future naval warfare? One must show common sense about such a thing. These people are planning an attack on the admiral's house because of the admiral's work. In other words, they are after plans, secret plans of future warfare. Being Russians, they know pretty well—if they don't know definitely—that in view of the constant delicacy of the relationship between Russian and ourselves our Admiralty must naturally look ahead and prepare for such an eventuality as a naval war. Well, it's more than likely that they know that a man like Admiral Magran will utilize his quiet holiday in the country to work out such war plans without disturbance. Perhaps they know he intends to go over certain definite plans—I don't know if it is so, but it is a possibility. Well, then, they mean to raid that house and get hold of those plans. Why, the whole of your evidence points that way. Studying the house at night before the family gets down will tell them which of the rooms are used by the family and which by the servants—I mean, when they see a new set of windows lit up they'll know which the family uses, therefore which to raid. That hole in the haystack is the hiding-place for the plans when they steal them. They're fly beggars. They'll know it won't be easy to get the plans out of the country once the alarm is given, so they'll hide them in the stack, and we can round them up and search 'em to our hearts' content without result. Then, when the uproar has died down a bit, someone absolutely unknown to us will take a motor run along the road to Stripe, recover the papers from the stack, and we'll

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never know a thing about it. Isn't that all sound enough, I. G.?"

"It's feasible," admitted Garthoyle.

"It's obvious deduction," said Tim. "Why, you say yourself those fellows banked on the newness of the stack as a guarantee that it would remain untouched for some time."

"It might fit in that way," agreed I. G. He reflected for a moment. "You've found out when the family goes down?"

"In three days' time. We'll send special men along, of course, and catch the rascals in the act."

"Three days," mused Garthoyle. "I doubt whether I shall be able to be on the spot, I'm ordered to lay up here."

"Yes, and you obey and get better, I. G.," said Tim with affection. "We can't run any risks with you, son, and you've done your end of the job, anyhow. All we have to do is to make the clean up. I'll keep you informed of anything fresh. Now I'm off to see if that gang can be located. From what you say I feel the men must be stopping in one of the half dozen big holiday towns on the sea side of the Downs. They could easily run a car to the top of the hills and approach Magran's place on foot and so evade attention."

After he had gone, Ignatius Garthoyle spent some time in reflection, then he lifted the telephone from the little table beside his couch and had a long and earnest conversation with a firm of lawyers who specialized in international business. His instructions contained a command to spare no expense. Then he sat back calmly, as it were, and waited.

On the day before the Magrans went down to their house under Balder's Ring, Tim Lever, who had been

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spending some days in Stripe and its neighbourhood, called on Ignatius Garthoyle.

"My report as promised," he grinned. "We haven't got on to your invisible ruffians, but we are on the way. My guess about their hanging out in one of the big seaside towns is probably correct. In a small disused chalk-pit on a side road leading from the coast to the Downs, we've found evidence that a car has been parked on one or more occasions—you know the signs, oil-droppings, and the like. More," Tim beamed, "it happens to be a mighty queer car. In that chalk pit and along that side lane it runs on stud tyres. But directly it approaches a main road it changes those tyres into a Michelin tread."

"They're using bands over the tyres, of course," said Ignatius Garthoyle.

"Yes, putting them on and taking them off to falsify the trail. However, though they haven't been out to the Downs in the last day or so, they've left enough markings on those little-used roads for us to be on to them—though on the main tarred roads we're done. However, we'll have a man watching that chalk-pit for the next few nights with means to signal to other men stationed on each of the roads leading to each of the seaside towns. We'll trail 'em home all right, even if we miss the deal at the Magran house."

"And you don't think you'll miss that, Tim?" smiled Ignatius Garthoyle.

"I don't think we will," grinned the inspector softly. "Magran is a sport. He's fitted in with all our ideas. He's agreed to let us have men stationed in his study, where his safe is, and the ground floor rooms at night. That will save us having men on the outside which might scare the blackguards away. They'll just walk into the house and into our arms."

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"Good, Tim—and everything is as you anticipated?"

"Well, almost," said Tim, a little sheepishly. "I was wrong about the Russian plans, the Admiral knows nothing about anything like that. Still, he is working on other plans that would be valuable to spies, and it doesn't matter to an international gang whose plans they are as long as there's money in it."

Ignatius Garthoyle spent a very uneasy day on the date when the Magran family went down to the house under Balder's Ring. In the middle of the day he telephoned the lawyers, but had nothing satisfactory from them. At the first possible moment next morning he rang up Tim Lever at Stripe.

Tim told him not to get jumpy. Nothing had happened, though things were blowing up that way. The brute of a Spanish knife-man had spent another night in the tree, a watcher had reported; and the same man, apparently, had been in Balder's Ring the whole of the day before studying the Magran's house through field-glasses. But the motor had not parked in the chalk-pit and nothing felonious had taken place.

"It's my belief that yesterday was just checking-up day," said Tim. "That knife-man made sure during the day that the Magrans had arrived. During the night he checked up the lighted windows to make certain which was the admiral's study and to find out what time he went to bed. He's got all his information now, so it should be for to-night or to-morrow night, I think."

Again Ignatius Garthoyle spent an anxious day, and again he rang up the great lawyers, without success. But this time he talked so urgently that the head of the firm agreed to ask the post office to send to his private house any cables that came through, and undertook himself to com-



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municate with him directly he heard news—no matter what the hour.

During the evening Ignatius Garthoyle's impatience became so definite that he rang up a garage and ordered a high-powered car to be ready for him at whatever hour, day or night, he needed it.

The hours passed on leaden feet. Eleven went—no news. Twelve—the lawyer had not yet rung up. One—he was still out of bed, dressed, waiting. He would have liked to have rung up Tim, but Tim, he knew, was at his station in the Magran house, and the sound of a telephone ringing in that house might spoil the trap.

Two o'clock. Ignatius Garthoyle was in a fever of impatience. Of course, it was ridiculous to feel like this, for Tim and a number of trained men were on the spot in Magran's house. They would act at any sign of the untoward. It was ridiculous of him to remain up like this—if the lawyer had not received the message by this he would not hear until the morning. Two-fifteen struck. "I'm a fool, I'd better go to bed," thought Ignatius Garthoyle. And the telephone began to clamour through the silent house with a noise that was loud enough to wake the dead, it seemed.

The great lawyer's voice was speaking. He began to apologize. A cable had come about 12.30, but he'd had to attend an important function and his man had, stupidly, left the thing to await his return instead of finding him on the phone.

"Yes, yes," cried Ignatius Garthoyle impatiently. "But you have the message? Tell me about that. Is it as grave as I anticipated?"

"It is," said the lawyer. "It is very grave." He read out the message while the curious, youthful face of Ignatius

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Garthoyle grew stern and set under his strange white hair. He cut the lawyer off abruptly and rang up the garage for the fast car.

Balder's Head is a little more than fifty miles from Town as the crow flies, but it is nearly seventy by road. Garthoyle's car went at a pace that made it difficult for him to keep his seat. They tore through the darkness of the night, roared through villages, stormed up hills and switch-backed down them at a breathless speed. Nevertheless, such are the windings of the southern roads with their endless necessities for slowing even at night, it took over two hours to reach the Magran's house. That is, it was after four when the headlong journey was ended.

It didn't end exactly at the Magran's house. As they rushed along the road from Stripe to that place, they met a car travelling towards Stripe. Instinctively Ignatius Garthoyle seemed to know that Tim was in that car. He signalled his man to stop and stuck his unmistakable white poll out of the window. Tim was in the car and he acted as promptly.

"All over for to-night, nothing doing," said Tim as they met on the road.

"You mean the ruffians did not come?" cried Garthoyle.

"They came all right," said Tim, "or rather a car load came to that chalk pit, and then went off towards the house. That was about twelve. At three-thirty I got a message from the man watching the chalk-pit telling me all the men had rejoined the car and driven off. To be trailed, by the way, to wherever they are going. But they didn't make an attempt to enter the house. I guess they were scared by something."

"You are sure of that?"

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"Of course I am. We were waiting like cats for 'em, but they didn't enter the house."

Ignatius Garthoyle lifted his head so that his white locks fluttered in the wind:

"It's blowing a sou-wester," he cried. "Could you have heard anyone moving about outside against this wind?"

"Perhaps not," said Tim testily. "But I tell you I had men stationed all along the ground floor. They couldn't have got in."

"Come back," cried Ignatius Garthoyle urgently, and dragged the inspector to his car.

"What's your new hunch?" asked Tim as they roared towards the house.

"Not new," said Garthoyle. "And I don't know anything yet—we've got to see if I'm right."

"Hum," said Tim, with the irritability of the early morning. "I hope it's not something tomfool. The admiral is getting a bit touchy. He thinks I'm a fool policeman with a bee in my bonnet after to-night. He's the sort to make things hot for a man, I. G."

The admiral certainly was touchy. Having been up until three on what he was beginning to suspect was a mare's nest, he was in no pleasant mood at being awakened at half-past four. He himself came down and opened the door for them in a real quarter-deck temper. Tim diverted the flow of strong opinion from himself by pushing Garthoyle forward, and Garthoyle fanned that bad temper to a blaze by asking idiotically:

"Is your son in bed, sir?"

"By the living cats, sir!" cried the admiral. "Has Scotland Yard gone mad? Is my son in bed? He's not a ramping lunatic who wakes people in the small hours. Of course he's in bed."

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"May we see for certain, sir?" asked Ignatius Garthoyle.

"No, sir," roared the admiral. "I've had enough of this foolery. I'll have no more in this house disturbed by your idiocy. You shall not see for yourself. Why should you?"

"Because it may mean his life—or death," said Ignatius Garthoyle quietly. And something in the quiet, set face under the strange white hair choked down the words the admiral was about to loose. He stared at Garthoyle and led the way to his son's room.

And his son was not in bed.

The room was apparently as the nurse had left it, the window opened a little at the top, nothing was disturbed. But the bed which had been slept in was empty. The admiral gave a short cry at the sight of that, and that cry was repeated by a lovely, dark-eyed, dark-skinned woman who, in a dressing-gown, had joined them as they climbed to the first floor where the boy's bedroom was. Ignatius Garthoyle said nothing, bent over the bed and sniffed. He looked up at the admiral.

"Do you smell that?" he asked.

The admiral bent and sniffed, said:

"I smell nothing—wait a minute, something rather sweetish."

"Chloroform," said Tim suddenly.

The woman—she was obviously the admiral's wife—gave a wail.

"Yes, chloroform," said Ignatius Garthoyle. "Very faint—it would have disappeared before morning," he ended significantly.

The woman wrung her hands gently, asked what it meant, what they should do. Garthoyle was already doing things.

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He said that someone must ring up a doctor at once, and he left the room at a run. Tim followed him, and the admiral, after telling his wife to call the doctor, ran after them. They went as fast as they could across the terrace of the house, across the lawns, down through the paddock to the further fields. And then, as they ran through the thin, growing light at dawn, a haystack loomed before them.

In a flash Garthoyle was between the haystack and the hedge, and tearing at the surface of the straw where it had been disturbed by the Spaniard and the Russian. Tim was on one side, the admiral the other. With a last wrench the mass of straw which had plugged a hole came away, and the admiral cried out. Filling the hole were the head and shoulders of a boy, apparently sleeping.

They stared for half a minute, then the admiral said in a thick voice:

"The young dare-devil! Thought he'd like to come out camping in the wilds, did he!"

"You forget the chloroform, sir," said Ignatius Garthoyle sternly. "And *that*."

He pointed to some fumes of vapour slowly emerging from the hole into the chill of the morning air.

"That's heat," said the admiral. "The inside of a new stack heats, doesn't it?"

"It is heat," said Ignatius Garthoyle, "and it is also death." He had pulled the boy's head out into the air, and was feeling the big arteries about his neck. "He's still alive, though, thank God, but an hour, half an hour more, and he would have been dead."

He wrapped the small, sweating figure in his coat and carried it up to the house, where he delivered it into the hands of the mother and doctor.

In the library of the house where Tim Lever had waited

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in vain for his burglar-spies, Ignatius Garthoyle began his explanation.

"Your wife's name before marriage, according to *Who's Who*, was Reytens," he said to the admiral. "And she was South American."

"That was her name," agreed the admiral, "but she is not entirely South American; her mother and grandmother were English."

"But she has relatives who are pure South American?" insisted Garthoyle.

"Yes, her uncle, who is dead, was such, so, naturally, are his children."

"Particularly Pepe Reytens."

"Particularly Pepe," said the admiral, with a wry smile at Ignatius Garthoyle's knowledge. "But we don't talk much about Pepe, he is a Black Sheep."

"Nevertheless, he is the next male in succession to your father-in-law's millions," said Ignatius Garthoyle.

"Not at all," said the admiral warmly. "My father-in-law left everything to my son, for his entire possession, after my wife's death." He stopped, his face becoming ashy, "But, by heavens, I see. If my son died before his mother, Pepe is undoubtedly the heir."

"So I suspected," said Garthoyle. "When I saw in *Who's Who* that your wife was the daughter of a South American millionaire of the name I had heard the ruffians mention, I felt that there was a greater flavour of Spanish-American villainy in this than Mr. Lever's theory of Russian spies. I asked some international lawyers to cable their agents in South America and find out all that was possible about the Reytens and the will. Only at two this morning did I learn that not only was Pepe next heir, but that latterly he has been borrowing great sums of money, using as security the

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fact that he expected to succeed to the Reytens' wealth. As your boy was, by all reports, healthy, that gave the matter an ugly turn. In other words, I felt that the strange actions of these mainly Spanish-American ruffians pointed to the fact that Pepe Reytens had hired them to murder your son for the sake of the inheritance."

"But how did you learn so exactly what these blackguards were going to do, I. G.?" asked Tim, after the dead silence of horror that followed his statement.

"I didn't know, I never do," said Garthoyle. "Until I heard from the lawyer I had only my surmise to go on, and your theory about spies was as sound as that. Even when I knew that murder was meant, I thought it would be done either by that brute of a knife or a curari dart. When you told me that the ruffians had been and gone away quietly, when I saw how carefully the boy's room had been left to give no clue, I realized that these men were cleverer than I had thought, and that that hole in the haystack had a rather horrible significance. Up to then I thought it merely the place where a body could be hidden. Now I saw that it was to be *the actual instrument of the murder.*"

"But how in heaven's name can a haystack *murder* anyone?" gasped Tim.

"It was a new haystack. The ruffians counted on that, you remember. New haystacks are dangerous to life. They go through a process of heating or sweating, and during that process not only is an intense heat generated—it can sometimes fire the stack by spontaneous combustion—but a deadly gas, acetaldehyde, is given off. You saw it coming off in the form of heat vapour. That gas has actually killed men who were foolish enough to sleep on top of a heating stack."

He paused, frowned, went on:

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"It was a diabolical and simple plan, you see. Study of the windows told them not which was the study, but which was the boy's window. That Spanish-American knife-man went up the ivy as silently as a monkey, for he is no doubt a woodsman, the wind also helping to drown any noise. It was easy to slip the half-open window fully open, easy to steal across to the boy and give him a whiff of chloroform. Then, disturbing not a thing, the man lifted the boy from between the sheets, got out of the window, closed it behind him, and again, like a monkey, climbed down the ivy with his burden. He went straight to the stack, pushed the boy into the hole, and plugged it with loose straw.

"The plan was practically perfect. The boy would be missing in the morning, but you would find no clue to how he was missing, for the smell of chloroform would be gone by then. It would look as though the boy had got out of the house on his own accord. And he would remain missing until you cut up that stack. And ~~when~~ that stack was cut up, in a year's time or even in a week's time, where would be the clues pointing to murder?"

He faced the admiral.

"You yourself, sir, thought at first that it was a boyish escapade. And that would have been the coroner's opinion. It would look as though the boy, for a prank, had tried sleeping out in that haystack, and after boring a hole in it, had drawn straw in after him to shut out the night air. Ignorant of the deadly peril of a new stack, he had been overcome by the fumes generated in the straw. That would be the natural verdict, and you would never even think to lay the crime at Pepe Reytens' door."

"But we will now," said Tim briskly, standing up. "You can thank your stars, Admiral, that this remarkable fellow noted those cigarette ends in Balder's Ring. Only a man

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who deals with crime before it is committed could have saved your son. And it is a good thing that he has only to look into a would-be murderer's face——”

He stopped short and gasped:

“By gosh, I. G., but you *never saw a single face!* You’ve convicted a whole gang of murderers without even seeing one of them! Why, that beats all records!”

The ~~book~~ is ~~red~~
The ~~book~~ is ~~red~~
This ~~book~~ is ~~red~~
Till ~~9~~ am ~~book~~ for
~~face~~ ~~Shame~~
Fear ~~4~~
~~book~~ ~~4~~
~~book~~ ~~4~~

See on Page ~~7~~

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BY
STEPHEN PHILLIPS



MRS. AMBERLEY'S MURDER

A groan and the sudden slam of a door wakened Mrs. Amberley at precisely three minutes past twelve. She switched on the electric lamp at her bedside and lay there, listening.

Eerie shadows lurked in the corners of the big room. Mrs. Amberley watched them, and continued to listen. Who had groaned in that curious, horrible manner? And who had slammed that door so violently?

Lying there, the good lady's mild-looking, somewhat faded blue eyes came to rest on the crimson-covered book beside the reading-lamp. It was entitled *The Room of Death*, and her eyes dwelt on it appreciatively.

Quite a good story. But why had the murderer forgotten to take the key out of the murdered man's door? Rather a silly thing to do, reflected Mrs. Amberley. Because, if the police hadn't found the key still in the door.

...

She shut her eyes tightly a moment. It wasn't *The Room of Death* about which she should be thinking just now. She should be devoting her attention to that groan and the slamming door.

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Queer sounds to be heard at such a time of the night, especially in such a sedate and well-ordered establishment as Mrs. Amberley's. A very quiet and respectable establishment, to say the least. The "guests" were always chosen with meticulous care. They had to be above suspicion.

Suddenly a sound outside in the passage caused Mrs. Amberley to start up in bed, her eyes staring in her head. She wasn't exactly frightened, but her nerves had become taut and strained now. Getting out of bed quietly, and draping a blue gown about her slim, rather bony shape, she crept stealthily to the door.

She turned the key, making no sound, for it was one of Mrs. Amberley's pet passions in life to see that all the locks of the doors were kept carefully oiled.

Slowly, almost furtively, she opened the bedroom door. The pale gleam from the lamp passed out into the darkened passage. And suddenly Mrs. Amberley grew as stiff and straight as a bit of wood.

Something lurked, quiet and still, in the eerie shadows out there. A man . . . Mrs. Amberley couldn't see his face. She could distinguish only the dim, blurred shape of his body, as he crouched back against the wall.

The man was watching her, evidently. His eyes, she knew, must be fixed on her, as she stood there in the doorway, with the yellow gleam of the lamp behind her.

From the darkness, as she stood there almost petrified, came another sound—the scared mewling of a cat. A sudden wave of anger flooded Mrs. Amberley's gaunt, sparse frame. Who had let the cat into the passage? Usually, it slept in the kitchen.

Mrs. Amberley had a fondness for cats, like most spinster ladies of her type; more, she had a particular fondness

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for Peter Pan, whom she had had since he was a mere fluffy little kitten, but. . . . Well, cats, like people, should be kept in their places. That was Mrs. Amberley's idea.

That had been the trouble with Mr. Bird. Mr. Bird was the kind of man who wouldn't keep in *his* place. That was why, only a few days ago, Mrs. Amberley had been compelled to give him notice to leave.

Mr. Bird had flown into a very violent temper and there had been some harsh words said on both sides, for Mrs. Amberley was a lady who could hold her own against most people when it came to a battle of wits—or tongues.

Mrs. Amberley tried to collect her thoughts. She grew angrier still at their persistence in wandering about at such a moment as this.

There was a man outside in the passage. A man who had no right to be there, and. . . . Suddenly, before Mrs. Amberley could think at all, the man moved. He gave a sort of jump in the darkness.

Mrs. Amberley heard the thud of his shoulder striking against the wall, followed by a spitting, snarling sound and a muttered oath. Next instant the man was flying down the stairs.

The front door was jerked open, slamming back on its hinges. Then came a complete and rather unnerving stillness.

Mrs. Amberley ventured into the passage. Then another door opened and she saw Mr. Swain peeping out nervously at her.

"I—I thought I heard a door slam somewhere," observed Mr. Swain.

Mrs. Amberley gazed up and down the passage.

"I heard a door slam, too," she said grimly, "*two* doors.

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Switch on your light, if you please, Mr. Swain. I think we've had burglars."

"*Burglars?*" echoed Mr. Swain, staring. Then the staring look began to grow in his eyes. He pointed with a trembling hand. "*Look,*" he breathed.

Mrs. Amberley looked. Farther down the passage Mr. Bird's bedroom door was wide open. No light showed, but the reflection of Mrs. Amberley's lamp, creeping across the passage, revealed the form of Mr. Bird stretched straight and still on the floor.

His face, ghastly white and grinning horribly, was turned towards the dim light. And, from beneath one of the stiffening, outstretched arms, there was slowly oozing a crimson stain.

"Why," breathed Mr. Swain hoarsely, "it—it's *blood.*"

Mrs. Amberley leant against the wall.

"I think", she said, rather faintly, "we'd better call the police."

Mr. Bird had been dead for at least ten minutes when the police arrived. There came first of all detective-inspector Bray, accompanied by a detective-sergeant and a uniformed constable who, without further ado, took up a quiet and commanding position in the doorway.

Mrs. Amberley, having roused the maids, waited in her own bedroom for the result of the police investigation. Mr. Swain also waited, in *his*. So did Mr. Lampwater, the accountant; and Mr. Grey, the retired engineer.

Mrs. Freestone, another of Mrs. Amberley's very respectable paying guests, was being attended to by a doctor; she had been seized with hysterics immediately the news of the murder had become known.

Suddenly there was a knock on Mrs. Amberley's door.

"Come in," she said.

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It was Mr. Swain. His face was white; he looked extremely ill at ease, which was hardly to be wondered at.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Amberley, who seemed to have completely recovered her normal condition. "What is it, Mr. Swain?"

Nervously he patted a cushion into place and sat down in the chair at the foot of the bed.

"This—this is a terrible business, Mrs. Amberley."

"Shocking, Mr. Swain."

"I—I never imagined that murder could be so—so ghastly."

"Nor I, Mr. Swain."

He looked round nervously. Presently his eyes came to rest on the book lying beside the ruffled bed.

Mr. Swain, like Mrs. Amberley, had always prided himself on being something of a criminologist. His chief recreation, like Mrs. Amberley's again, was the reading of crime and detective stories.

In fact, privately, Mr. Swain had rather fancied himself in the role of a detective trying to solve a very mysterious and intricate murder.

In her spare moments Mrs. Amberley, too, had studied crime—and criminals. Indeed, it had become something of an obsession with Mrs. Amberley, much the same as it had done with Mr. Swain.

More than once, when a public crime—generally a murder—had been committed, Mrs. Amberley and Mr. Swain would sit and talk and argue about it.

Usually Mr. Swain relied on theory and deduction—methods which, he said, were followed by all the best detectives. Mrs. Amberley's system of application was a more practical one. Generally she seized on certain facts or data and clung to them tenaciously.

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Privately, Mr. Swain admired Mrs. Amberley intensely, although up to now, he had never been able to screw up his courage sufficiently to make his feelings for her plain.

"I—I suppose", he suggested, "the police will want to question us?"

"Naturally," she agreed.

"They're taking photographs of the room and the body now."

"I wonder they haven't questioned us before this," said Mrs. Amberley impatiently. "After all, aren't they rather giving the man a better chance to get clean away?"

"You're sure he did it, then?"

Mrs. Amberley gave a slight start. She seemed to look at Mr. Swain with wondering curiosity.

"Sure this man did it?" she echoed. "Why, of course. Who else *could* have done it?"

"I—I don't know," admitted Mr. Swain. "Only——"

"Well?"

Mr. Swain shifted uneasily on his chair. He made no reply. In fact, he seemed a little sorry that he spoken at all.

Mrs. Amberley's eyes challenged him.

"Come on," she said: "you've thought of something. What is it?"

"Well," said Mr. Swain, almost apologetically, "it just occurred to me, you see, that——"

There was a knock on the door. It opened. The burly figure of the detective-sergeant stood there, looking in at them.

"Sorry to have to trouble you," he said, "but Inspector Bray is about to question everybody in the house. Would you mind coming this way?"

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Mrs. Amberley and Mr. Swain rose and followed the officer into the room of death. The murdered man had been covered over with a sheet. Inspector Bray sat at the window. He was a broad-shouldered, red-faced man; Mrs. Amberley thought he looked more like a country farmer than a detective.

In the room were Mr. Lampwater, quite at ease, smoking a cigarette and apparently intensely interested in the proceedings; Mr. Grey, who looked white and shaken, his dark eyes flickering hither and thither uncomfortably; the two maids, and Mrs. Freestone—who entered last of all.

She, like Mr. Lampwater, was smoking a cigarette. A pale green dressing-gown reached to her feet, as she stood gazing calmly across the room at the police-inspector. He glanced first of all at the landlady.

"Mrs. Amberley," he said crisply, "I should like to ask you a few questions. Please consider your answers and help me all you can. To begin with, what do you know about the dead man?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Amberley promptly, "nothing at all, Inspector."

"Nothing?" he repeated sharply. "How do you mean? Hasn't he been staying here for some time?"

"Nearly two years."

"And you know nothing of his private life?"

"No, Inspector."

"How did he get a living?"

Mrs. Amberley smiled a little.

"He was a philatelist."

The inspector looked embarrassed.

"I mean," explained Mrs. Amberley, "he collected postage stamps."

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"Ah," mused the Inspector, "an interesting hobby, so I've been told. Had he many friends?"

"None at all that I know of."

"No lady acquaintances?"

"I've never heard of any."

"He was a man of very retiring disposition, I take it?"

"Oh, yes, very."

"He was inclined to be quarrelsome at times?"

"Well, at times, yes." She looked at the Inspector rather hard.

"He was given notice to quit, I understand."

"Yes, I gave him notice."

"Why, Mrs. Amberley?"

"I took exception to the late hours he kept. I—I like my guests to be indoors at reasonable hours."

"Is that the *only* reason why you gave him notice?"

Mrs. Amberley hesitated.

"Yes," she said, then.

The Inspector studied her.

"Come, Mrs. Amberley, are you being quite open with me? Wasn't there some other reason, as well?"

"Well, yes, there was. I—I objected to Mr. Bird having a lady in his room."

"Who was the lady?"

"Mrs. Freestone."

"Is that what led to the quarrel between you and Mr. Bird?"

Mrs. Amberley regarded him critically.

"Inspector," she said sweetly, "I don't want to be rude to you, but haven't you been listening overmuch to servants' tittle-tattle? I presume, Inspector, you have gained most of your knowledge from questioning my two maids before we were brought here?"

V. Indraghly Book

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The Inspector smiled good-humouredly.

"Exactly," he agreed. "Now, Mrs. Amberley, will you please tell me exactly what happened to-night?"

She glanced across the room at Mr. Swain, who was looking on keenly.

"Excuse me, Inspector, but before we go any further, might I make a suggestion?"

"As many as you like, Mrs. Amberley. Well?"

"I would suggest," she said, "that, before continuing this examination, you send out some information about the man I saw in the passage. That is, unless you want him to make a clean get-away."

The Inspector looked slightly amused.

"If it's of interest to you," he said, "that was the first thing I did."

"But you've no description of him."

"Possibly not, but—well, we have a system in cases of this kind, Mrs. Amberley. Our people will probably draw a dozen or more suspects into the net before the morning."

Mrs. Amberley looked rather disconcerted.

"Now, tell me, please: what woke you?"

"A—a sort of sound in the passage outside my door."

"What sort of sound was it?"

"A—a sort of scuffling noise."

"And then?"

"I heard somebody groan—twice."

"Yes?"

"Then," said Mrs. Amberley, "a door slammed."

"Then you got out of bed and went into the passage?"

"I did."

"And you saw a man there?"

"I saw the—the *shape* of a man."

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"There was no light, except from the lamp on your table?"

"None at all."

"You couldn't see what he looked like?"

"No."

"Or what he was wearing?"

"No. He—he was just a shadow, if you understand."

"You heard two slams?"

"No, not really. Only one *slam*. The other sound was the door downstairs being dragged open. More of a bang than a slam."

"Thanks, you're pretty lucid, Mrs. Amberley." She flushed faintly. And, when she did that, she looked quite pretty. Mr. Swain noticed it and sighed once again.

"Now, if you please, Mr.—er—Swain?"

"I—I'm sorry, Inspector, but I really can't tell you anything more than Mrs. Amberley has already done. I—I just heard a sort of slam, or bang, and, when I opened my door, I saw Mrs. Amberley and—and the body."

"You knew the dead man fairly well, of course?"

"To an extent, sir."

"What is your profession, Mr. Swain?"

"Well, sir, I—I haven't got one, really."

The inspector eyed him keenly.

"Do you mind explaining that?"

"Well, sir, I—I'm sort of independent," said Mr. Swain, flushing. "Not—not a very large income of course, but—but just sufficient for my needs. I—I haven't very expensive tastes, you see."

"What do you do with yourself most of the time, Mr. Swain?" asked the Inspector pleasantly. "Read, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"What sort of books do you read?"

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"Well, mostly detective stuff, sir." Mr. Swain's flush deepened into fiery red.

"Ah, you're one of those amateur sleuths, I can see," observed the Inspector genially. "Well, now, Mrs. Freestone, I think it's your turn."

Mrs. Freestone drew the pale green dressing-gown closer about her slim body. She had ash-blonde hair and deep-set, beautiful eyes.

"I can tell you nothing," she said quickly. "I heard nothing, saw nothing, until——"

"Until you were roused and told that Mr. Bird had been murdered?"

"That's so."

"You were rather friendly with him, weren't you?"

"Rather. . . ." Her lip curled and her eyes flashed defiance at the Inspector.

"Had some mutual interest, perhaps, Mrs. Freestone?"

"Yes," she flung at him, "postage stamps."

The Inspector nodded seriously.

"Quite so. He wasn't—er—in love with you, or anything of that sort, of course?"

"I don't know. He never said so. I never gave it a thought."

"You just went to his room to discuss postage-stamps with him?"

"Yes," she flashed.

"Thank you, Mrs. Freestone. Now, Mr. Lampwater, if you please. You are an accountant, I believe."

"Quite true, I am," admitted Mr. Lampwater. He was a tall, thin man, with a rather cruel, sensual mouth. Not at all a nice-looking man, somehow. . . .

"You were on friendly terms with the dead man, Mr. Lampwater?"

STEPHEN PHILLIPS

Mr. Lampwater smiled grimly.

"Not at all," he stated. "Matter of fact, I always detested the very sight of him, and I think he detested the very sight of me, too. We hardly ever spoke, unless we were forced to."

The Inspector paused a moment; then he said quietly:

"I see. May I take it that it was because of your attentions to this lady here?" The Inspector politely indicated Mrs. Freestone, who stared angrily at everyone.

"You may take it how you like," said Mr. Lampwater, almost snarling, and glaring defiance at his questioner.

The Inspector smiled.

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Grey?"

Mr. Grey stepped forward. He was a pleasant, open-faced young man, looking rather ill.

Mrs. Amberley edged her way to Mr. Swain. She breathed into his ear: "What on earth is he asking us all these silly questions for?"

"Hanged if I know," said Mr. Swain blankly.

"Surely it's plain enough," whispered Mrs. Amberley.

"Ought to be," grunted Mr. Swain, and he turned to stare somewhat disgustedly at the Inspector. "Still, I suppose he knows his job. . . ."

"I dare say," breathed Mrs. Amberley. "I'm learning things to-night. I didn't know Mr. Lampwater had been paying attentions to Mrs. Freestone. Good thing I didn't know, anyway. . . ."

"Still, I don't see what all these things have got to do with the murder," grunted Mr. Swain irritably. "Seems like a silly waste of time to me. That is, unless—" Mr. Swain paused, as if struck by a sudden thought.

"Unless what?" she prompted him softly.

"Tell you later," said Mr. Swain, with a curious stare.

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The Inspector was questioning Mr. Grey: "Some time ago, Mr. Grey, you became interested in stamp-collecting, I believe?"

"That's so. Mr. Bird started me off. Gave me a few stamps to begin my collection with. You see, I'm a neurasthenic, and he thought I needed some new interest in life."

"Quite a sensible notion," agreed the Inspector smoothly. "Now, Mr. Grey, I want to put it to you. Remember, you needn't answer my questions unless you feel inclined to do so. Did not you and the dead man quarrel violently only a few nights ago?"

"Yes," admitted Mr. Grey, without hesitation, "we did."

"What did you quarrel about?"

"Stamps," said Mr. Grey, almost defiantly. "It may seem odd to you, Inspector, but Bird was a very quick-tempered man."

"I wanted to buy a certain stamp off him and he refused. Then, that evening, he came rushing into my room to say that somebody had pinched the blessed thing."

"Did he suspect anyone?"

"Not that I know of. At least——"

"Well?"

"He accused me of stealing it, at first. That was just his way. Afterwards, he—he apologized."

"And that was the end of the matter, as far as you were concerned?"

"Quite."

Mrs. Amberley breathed: "More news to me. . . . I never knew they'd had a quarrel."

"You were at the pictures that evening," Mr. Swain reminded her.

STEPHEN PHILLIPS

"Of course," nodded Mrs. Amberley, her face clearing, "that explains it."

The Inspector rose.

"Well, I think that's all for now, ladies and gentlemen. No doubt you would like to go to your rooms."

They began to troop out slowly, all except Mrs. Amberley and Mr. Swain, who lingered in the doorway. Suddenly there was a new commotion outside. The Inspector pushed his way to the door.

In the passage a dirty, brutal-looking man was struggling violently in the grip of two plain-clothes men. The Inspector stared at him sardonically.

"Bill Mason, eh? Bring him in here, Phipps."

The big, brutal-looking fellow, apparently realizing that the game was up, stopped his savage struggles. The two detectives led him into the room. Inspector Bray turned and faced him.

"Well, Mason," he asked, "what have you got to say, eh?"

"Nothin'," Mason growled. "I was in the 'ouse. I admit that. But I didn't do no murder. I swear I didn't."

He began to whine desperately. "I know I've done a stretch or two, guv'nor, but I ain't never lifted a hand in violence. You know that, guv'nor. . . ."

The Inspector pointed.

"Sit down, Mason. You needn't get jumpy. I'm not going to 'grill' you. Where did you find him, Phipps?"

"Hiding in a shed at the back of the garden, sir," replied the plain-clothes man. "Had to carry him here, he was that violent."

"Mason," said the Inspector crisply, "you've got to do some talking. You were in this house to-night. You forced a way through one of the basement windows. You took a

few odds and ends from the dining-room on your way upstairs. Then you came in here and——”

“That’s a dirty lie,” Mason snarled. “You’re tryin’ to frame me, curse you!”

“You say you didn’t enter this room to-night?”

“No. I—I got no time. . . . I—I just come up the stairs when I heard a door slam.”

“You heard a slam, too, did you?”

“Yes, guv’nor. I stood still. It was pretty dark. . . . Then I ’eard somebody groan. ’Orrible, it was. . . . Then a door opened and I saw a woman. . . .

“This lady?” The Inspector nodded towards Mrs. Amberley.

“Yes, that’s her, guv’nor. So I just keeps still a minute, then I makes a dart for it. There was a blinkin’ cat or something in the way. I trod on it. . . . That’s all I know, guv’nor, s’welp me, it is.”

Mason bent down and began to rub his leg tenderly, the mild faded blue eyes of Mrs. Amberley watching him. She turned suddenly to Inspector Bray.

“May I make a request?”

He looked at her.

“Why, certainly, Mrs. Amberley. What is it?”

“I—I’d like to view the—the body,” she said calmly.

The Inspector flung her a look of surprise. So did Mr. Swain. Then, with a slight shrug, the officer stepped forward and drew off the sheet.

Mrs. Amberley gazed silently. She shuddered a little. It was not a nice thing to look at. . . .

“Thank you,” she said, at last, and the Inspector covered the body again. “Inspector, might I ask *you* a few questions, for a change?”

The officer’s eyes twinkled.

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"You're rather interested in crime, aren't you?" he smiled. "At least, I gather as much from those maids of yours. Well?"

"How was Mr. Bird killed, Inspector?"

"Stabbed", said Inspector Bray shortly, "in the back, with a pair of scissors."

"*Scissors?*"

"Yes. I suppose he was in the habit of using them for cutting purposes. They were his *own* scissors, you see. No doubt you've seen them lying about at one time or the other?"

"Quite right, Inspector, I have. Did you find any fingerprints?"

"Not one," grunted the officer; "that is, unless we find any on the photographic plates, and that isn't likely. No, the murderer either wore gloves for the purpose, in which case the crime was obviously premeditated; or else he used a handkerchief or something to hold the scissors; or, thirdly, he was clever enough to stay and wipe the parts he had touched."

"Has anything been taken from the room?"

"I don't think so. . . . There was a book of stamps lying on the floor, though, as if. . . . Well, both the maids swore nothing had been touched."

Mrs. Amberley smiled curiously.

"Why didn't you come to me in the first place, Inspector? Were you suspicious of *me*?"

"Not exactly." He stared at her seriously. "But you'd quarrelled with him, hadn't you? And *scissors*—well, they rather suggest a woman you know."

Mrs. Amberley said slowly: "Thanks, Inspector. I can hear Peter Pan. I must have shut him in the bedroom."

"Peter Pan? Who's that?"

MRS. AMBERLEY'S MURDER

Mrs. Amberley turned towards the door.

"Oh," she said, "just a cat."

Mrs. Amberley sat thoughtfully on the edge of the bed. Mr. Swain, who had followed her into the room, said:

"Well, that's that, I suppose. Who did it?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Amberley. "Do you?"

"No," admitted Mr. Swain frankly, "but we've got all the clues, anyhow." He looked at her hard. "As I was about to say, when that detective came for us: Who slammed the door—and *what* door was it?"

Mrs. Amberley sat up.

"Funny," she said, "that really didn't occur to me. I'm afraid I'm not such a good detective as I imagined."

"How d'you know?" argued Mr. Swain. "Why, even the police themselves seem baffled."

"Did Mason do it?" demanded Mrs. Amberley.

"Or Mr. Lampwater?"

"Or Mr. Grey?"

"Or Mrs. Freestone?"

"Or you?" suggested Mrs. Amberley, quite seriously.

"Or *you*?" said Mr. Swain; but he grinned as he said it. "Now, let's be serious a moment. To begin with, why was the front door left open?"

"Goodness only knows," said Mrs. Amberley. "Why?"

"Mason entered by a basement window. In any case, he wouldn't have deliberately opened the hall door, even to provide an easy get-away. Too obvious, for one thing. Why, anybody passing——"

"Quite. That's an obvious deduction."

Mr. Swain smiled a trifle wanly.

"I can do the deduction," he said modestly, "but I'm

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depending upon you, Mrs. Amberley, for practical application.

"Now, it wasn't the front door that slammed, because the front door was open at the time. At least, we must presume so. And it wasn't Bird's door, either, because *his* door wasn't shut. His arm was blocking it."

"True," agreed Mrs. Amberley. She sat gently stroking the soft black head of Peter Pan.

"Well," resumed Mr. Swain, "that doesn't clear Mason. It only complicates the whole thing."

"Exactly what I've been thinking."

"Suppose Grey went there with the idea of pinching that stamp he wanted?"

"Suppose he did?"

"Or Lampwater got insanely jealous and——"

"It's been done before," nodded Mrs. Amberley.

"Nothing was taken from the room apparently."

"But someone *might* have intended to take something, only they were disturbed."

"Precisely."

There was a knock. Mrs. Amberley looked round. It was one of the maids, looking dreadfully scared.

"Well, Rose."

The girl stared at her with big round eyes, like saucers.

"It—it's about the door, mum. I—I heard what you was a-sayin'. The inspector told me to wait outside in the passage, mum, in case he wanted to ask me any more questions. You see, mum, I—I was a-talkin' to somebody at the door to-night——"

"A man, I suppose?"

"Yes, mum. It—it was only for a minute or two. It—it was that door slammin' that give me such a start. I come runnin' inside and gave the door a

sort of push, thinkin' it would shut, but it didn't, and——"

"All right, Rose. I suppose you've told the Inspector?"

"Yes, mum."

The girl backed out of the door. Mrs. Amberley, a far-away look in her eyes, continued to stroke Peter Pan's head. Mr. Swain, too, gazed into space.

"Well," he said, "that settles the mystery of the open door."

Mrs. Amberley said nothing. Mr. Swain sat gazing at her a trifle moodily. He had put all his cards on the table. Now it was Mrs. Amberley's turn.

"A door slammed *somewhere*," said she, at last. "In this house. . . . The murder was done from *inside*—I mean, it was done by somebody who lives here. Do you agree?"

"Entirely," said Mr. Swain. He stared at her expectantly.

"If you hadn't mentioned it," went on Mrs. Amberley, "I don't suppose I should ever have got started on this particular train of thought." She gazed at him intently. "Did you notice the way Mason rubbed at his leg just now?"

"No," said Mr. Swain, staring. "Did he?"

"He did. Another thing, have you ever observed what pretty legs Mrs. Freestone possesses?"

"Pretty legs?" said Mr. Swain. He seemed bewildered. "Why, Mrs. Amberley, I—I don't as a rule stare at women's legs."

"Very pretty legs," added Mrs. Amberley, with a queer smile. "And a woman who has pretty legs doesn't as a rule cover them up. Anyway, Mrs. Freestone never did. On the contrary, she always wore her skirts extremely short."

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"I—I don't know what you're getting at," confessed Mr. Swain.

"Listen. I may be wrong. It's just a guess in the dark, I suppose. But somebody in this house killed Mr. Bird. With a pair of scissors, remember. Didn't you hear what the Inspector said?"

"Yes, but—— Well, where's your motive?"

"I haven't got one," Mrs. Amberley admitted frankly.

"Well, a murder without a motive is ridiculous."

"Is it? I'm not so sure. A murder with a *hidden* motive isn't ridiculous, anyway.

"To-night, Mrs. Freestone put on an old pale green dressing-gown. Why? She hasn't worn the thing before. She bought it two years ago and said she hated the sight of it. Why? Because it was too long, because it covered up those pretty legs of hers too much.

"She bought another, a red one. It just reaches below her knees. Why did she put on the green one to-night?"

"I can't see——"

Mrs. Amberley got up.

"I'm going to see the Inspector," she said. "You'd better come, too."

Mr. Swain, with a blank look on his face, followed her outside. The detective officer was standing thoughtfully by the window, staring down into the street below. In a chair Mason was huddled, sullen and fearful. A plain-clothes man was writing notes.

The Inspector swung round.

"Well?" he grunted, none too pleasantly. "What is it now?"

Mrs. Amberley said rather nervously:

"Inspector, I may be making a mistake—I rather hope I am. But will you do me a favour?"

"Probably. What is it this time?"

MRS. AMBERLEY'S MURDER

"I'd like you to come with me to Mrs. Freestone's room."

"Now?"

"Please."

The Inspector hesitated, scratching his ear. Then he nodded curtly and followed Mrs. Amberley along the passage. Mr. Swain brought up the rear.

Mrs. Amberley knocked on the door. A voice bade them enter. Mrs. Freestone was sitting in a chair, still attired in the green dressing-gown.

Mrs. Amberley said, with sudden sharp excitement: "Inspector, *look at her legs.*"

Too late Mrs. Freestone sought to draw the bottom of the long dressing-gown about her legs. The Inspector had seen. Her legs were scratched and bleeding still, where something had torn at them.

Mrs. Amberley stabbed an accusing finger.

"That was the scuffling noise I heard," she cried, "just before the door slammed. *Your* door.

"You were coming out of his room, after you had. . . . It was dark and you didn't notice the cat in the passage. That's what first gave me the idea, when I saw Mason bend and feel his leg. The cat had scratched him, too.

"That's why you put on that long dressing-gown, to hide the scratches on your legs. That's why. . . ."

Mrs. Freestone stood an instant with clenched hands, staring at their rigid faces. Then, with a short laugh, she walked to the bed and perched herself on the side of it.

"Very clever of you, Mrs. Amberley," she sneered. "Yes, if you want to know, I killed him.

"Why? Well, here's something you don't know, clever Mrs. Amberley. He was carrying on with another woman. That's why he was always coming in late. That's why I killed him."

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She almost spat the words at them. "Yes," she said, "and I'd do it again!"

Mrs. Amberley gently stirred her tea.

"The Inspector thanked me so nicely," she said, sighing. "Really, he was rather *nice*."

"I don't see what else he could have done," grunted Mr. Swain, "seeing that it was really you who solved the whole thing."

Mrs. Amberley smiled.

"Really, Mr. Swain, you're much too modest. If you hadn't spoken about the door slamming first of all——"

Mr. Swain moved nervously in his seat.

"I—I've been thinking," he said meekly. "With my powers of deduction and your methods of practical application, we—we ought to—to make quite a success together."

"After all this scandal, and—and one thing and the other, the boarding-house business is practically finished isn't it? And—well, it just occurred to me that——"

Mrs. Amberley ceased to stir her tea.

"Are you suggesting," she demanded, "that we set up a private detective-agency together, Mr. Swain?"

"No," he said softly, "I'm suggesting we set up in holy matrimony together. What do you say, Clara?"

Mrs. Amberley gazed into her cup.

"Well," she said, "I'm willing to try anything once."

*first visit
than report.*

Image

BY
DOROTHY L. SAYERS



THE MAN WHO KNEW HOW

For perhaps the twentieth time since the train had left Carlisle, Pender glanced up from *Murder at the Manse* and caught the eye of the man opposite.

He frowned a little. It was irritating to be watched so closely, and always with that faint, sardonic smile. It was still more irritating to allow oneself to be so much disturbed by the smile and the scrutiny. Pender wrenched himself back to his book with a determination to concentrate upon the problem of the minister murdered in the library.

But the story was of the academic kind that crowds all its exciting incidents into the first chapter, and proceeds thereafter by a long series of deductions to a scientific solution in the last. The thin thread of interest, spun precariously upon the wheel of Pender's reasoning brain, had been snapped. Twice he had to turn back to verify points that he had missed in reading. Then he became aware that his eyes had followed three closely argued pages without conveying anything whatever to his intelligence.

He was not thinking about the murdered minister at all—he was becoming more and more actively conscious of the other man's face.

A queer face, Pender thought.

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There was nothing especially remarkable about the features in themselves; it was their expression that daunted Pender. It was a secret face, the face of one who knew a great deal to other people's disadvantage. The mouth was a little crooked and tightly tucked in at the corners as though savouring a hidden amusement. The eyes, behind a pair of rimless pince-nez, glittered curiously; but that was possibly due to the light reflected in the glasses.

Pender wondered what the man's profession might be. He was dressed in a dark lounge suit, a raincoat and a shabby soft hat; his age was perhaps about forty.

Pender coughed unnecessarily and settled back into his corner, raising the detective story high before his face, barrier-fashion. This was worse than useless. He gained the impression that the man saw through the manoeuvre and was secretly entertained by it. He wanted to fidget, but felt obscurely that his doing so would in some way constitute a victory for the other man.

In his self-consciousness he held himself so rigid that attention to his book became a sheer physical impossibility.

There was no stop now before Rugby, and it was unlikely that any passenger would enter from the corridor to break up this disagreeable *solitude à deux*. But something must be done. The silence had lasted so long that any remark, however trivial, would—so Pender felt—burst upon the tense atmosphere with the unnatural clatter of an alarm clock. One could, of course, go out into the corridor and not return, but that would be an acknowledgment of defeat.

Pender lowered *Murder at the Manse* and caught the man's eye again.

"Getting tired of it?" asked the man.

"Night journeys are always a bit tedious," replied Pen-

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der, half relieved and half reluctant. "Would you like a book?"

He took *The Paper-Clip Clue* from his attaché-case and held it out hopefully. The other man glanced at the title and shook his head.

"Thanks very much," he said, "but I never read detective stories. They're so—inadequate, don't you think so?"

"They are rather lacking in characterization and human interest, certainly," said Pender, "but on a railway journey——"

"I don't mean that," said the other man. "I am not concerned with humanity. But all these murderers are so incompetent—they bore me."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Pender. "At any rate they are usually a good deal more imaginative and ingenious than murderers in real life."

"Than the murderers who are found out in real life, yes," admitted the other man.

"Even some of those did pretty well before they got pinched," objected Pender. "Crippen, for instance; he need never have been caught if he hadn't lost his head and run off to America. George Joseph Smith did away with at least two brides quite successfully before fate and the *News of the World* intervened."

"Yes," said the other man, "but look at the clumsiness of it all; the elaboration, the lies, the paraphernalia. Absolutely unnecessary."

"Oh, come!" said Pender. "You can't expect committing a murder and getting away with it to be as simple as shelling peas."

"Ah!" said the other man. "You think that, do you?"

Pender waited for him to elaborate this remark, but nothing came of it. The man leaned back and smiled in his

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secret way at the roof of the carriage; he appeared to think the conversation not worth going on with. Pender, taking up his book again, found himself attracted by his companion's hands. They were white and surprisingly long in the fingers. He watched them gently tapping upon their owner's knee—then resolutely turned a page—then put the book down once more and said:

"Well, if it's so easy, how would *you* set about committing a murder?"

"I?" repeated the man. The light on his glasses made his eyes quite blank to Pender, but his voice sounded gently amused. "That's different; *I* should not have to think twice about it."

"Why not?"

"Because I happen to know how to do it."

"Do you indeed?" muttered Pender, rebelliously.

"Oh, yes; there's nothing in it."

"How can you be sure? You haven't tried, I suppose?"

"It isn't a case of trying," said the man. "There's nothing tentative about my method. That's just the beauty of it."

"It's easy to say that," retorted Pender, "but what *is* this wonderful method?"

"You can't expect me to tell you that, can you?" said the other man, bringing his eyes back to rest on Pender's. "It might not be safe. You look harmless enough, but who could look more harmless than Crippen? Nobody is fit to be trusted with *absolute* control over other people's lives."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Pender. "I shouldn't think of murdering anybody."

"Oh, yes, you would," said the other man, "if you really believed it was safe. So would anybody. Why are all these tremendous artificial barriers built up round murder by

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the Church and the law? Just because it's everybody's crime, and just as natural as breathing."

"But that's ridiculous!" cried Pender, warmly.

"You think so, do you? That's what most people would say. But I wouldn't trust 'em. Not with sulphate of thanatol to be bought for twopence at any chemist's."

"Sulphate of what?" asked Pender sharply.

"Ah! you think I'm giving something away. Well, it's a mixture of that and one or two other things—all equally ordinary and cheap. For ninepence you could make up enough to poison the entire Cabinet—and even you would hardly call that a crime, would you? But of course one wouldn't polish the whole lot off at once; it might look funny if they all died simultaneously in their baths."

"Why in their baths?"

"That's the way it would take them. It's the action of the hot water that brings on the effect of the stuff, you see. Any time from a few hours to a few days after administration. It's quite a simple chemical reaction and it couldn't possibly be detected by analysis. It would just look like heart failure."

Pender eyed him uneasily. He did not like the smile; it was not only derisive, it was smug, it was almost—gloating—triumphant! He could not quite put a name to it.

"You know," pursued the man, thoughtfully pulling a pipe from his pocket and beginning to fill it, "it is very odd how often one seems to read of people being found dead in their baths. It must be a very common accident. Quite temptingly so. After all, there is a fascination about murder. The thing grows upon one—that is, I imagine it would, you know."

"Very likely," said Pender.

"Look at Palmer. Look at Gesina Gottfried. Look

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at Armstrong. No, I wouldn't trust anybody with that formula—not even a virtuous young man like yourself.”

The long white fingers tamped the tobacco firmly into the bowl and struck a match.

“But how about you?” said Pender, irritated. (Nobody cares to be called a virtuous young man.) “If nobody is fit to be trusted——”

“I'm not, eh?” replied the man. “Well, that's true, but it's past praying for now, isn't it? I know the thing and I can't unknow it again. It's unfortunate, but there it is. At any rate you have the comfort of knowing that nothing disagreeable is likely to happen to *me*. Dear me! Rugby already. I get out here. I have a little bit of business to do at Rugby.”

He rose and shook himself, buttoned his raincoat about him and pulled the shabby hat more firmly down above his enigmatic glasses. The train slowed down and stopped. With a brief good night and a crooked smile the man stepped on to the platform. Pender watched him stride quickly away into the drizzle beyond the radius of the gas-light.

“Dotty or something,” said Pender, oddly relieved. “Thank goodness, I seem to be going to have the carriage to myself.”

He returned to *Murder at the Manse*, but his attention still kept wandering.

“What was the name of that stuff the fellow talked about?”

For the life of him he could not remember.

It was on the following afternoon that Pender saw the news item. He had bought the *Standard* to read at lunch, and the word “Bath” caught his eye; otherwise he would

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probably have missed the paragraph altogether, for it was only a short one.

“WEALTHY MANUFACTURER DIES IN BATH

“WIFE’S TRAGIC DISCOVERY

“A distressing discovery was made early this morning by Mrs. John Brittlesea, wife of the well-known head of Brittlesea’s Engineering Works at Rugby. Finding that her husband, whom she had seen alive and well less than an hour previously, did not come down in time for his breakfast, she searched for him in the bathroom, where, on the door being broken down, the engineer was found lying dead in his bath, life having been extinct, according to the medical men, for half an hour. The cause of the death is pronounced to be heart failure. The deceased manufacturer. . . .”

“That’s an odd coincidence,” said Pender. “At Rugby. I should think my unknown friend would be interested—if he is still there, doing his bit of business. I wonder what his business is, by the way.”

It is a very curious thing how, when once your attention is attracted to any particular set of circumstances, that set of circumstances seems to haunt you. You get appendicitis: immediately the newspapers are filled with paragraphs about statesmen suffering from appendicitis and victims dying of it; you learn that all your acquaintances have had it, or know friends who have had it, and either died of it, or recovered from it with more surprising and spectacular rapidity than yourself; you cannot open a popular magazine without seeing its cure mentioned as one of the triumphs of modern surgery, or dip into a scientific treatise without coming across a comparison of the vermiform

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appendix in men and monkeys. Probably these references to appendicitis are equally frequent at all times, but you only notice them when your mind is attuned to the subject.

At any rate, it was in this way that Pender accounted to himself for the extraordinary frequency with which people seemed to die in their baths at this period.

The thing pursued him at every turn. Always the same sequence of events: the hot bath, the discovery of the corpse, the inquest; always the same medical opinion: heart failure following immersion in too-hot water. It began to seem to Pender that it was scarcely safe to enter a hot bath at all. He took to making his own bath cooler and cooler every day, until it almost ceased to be enjoyable.

He skimmed his paper each morning for headlines about baths before settling down to read the news; and was at once relieved and vaguely disappointed if a week passed without a hot-bath tragedy.

One of the sudden deaths that occurred in this way was that of a young and beautiful woman whose husband, an analytical chemist, had tried without success to divorce her a few months previously. The coroner displayed a tendency to suspect foul play and put the husband through a severe cross-examination. There seemed, however, to be no getting behind the doctor's evidence.

Pender, brooding fancifully over the improbable possible, wished, as he did every day of the week, that he could remember the name of that drug the man in the train had mentioned.

Then came the excitement in Pender's own neighbourhood. An old Mr. Skimmings, who lived alone with a housekeeper in a street just round the corner, was found dead in his bathroom. His heart had never been strong.

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The housekeeper told the milkman that she had always expected something of the sort to happen, for the old gentleman would always take his bath so hot.

Pender went to the inquest.

The housekeeper gave her evidence. Mr. Skimmings had been the kindest of employers, and she was heartbroken at losing him. No, she had not been aware that Mr. Skimmings had left her a large sum of money, but it was just like his goodness of heart. The verdict was Death by Misadventure.

Pender, that evening, went out for his usual stroll with the dog. Some feeling of curiosity moved him to go round past the late Mr. Skimmings's house. As he loitered by, glancing up at the blank windows, the garden gate opened and a man came out. In the light of a street lamp, Pender recognized him at once.

"Hullo!" he said.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said the man. "Viewing the site of the tragedy, eh? What do *you* think about it all?"

"Oh, nothing very much," said Pender. "I didn't know him. Odd, our meeting again like this."

"Yes, isn't it? You live near here, I suppose."

"Yes," said Pender; and then wished he hadn't. "Do you live in these parts too?"

"Me?" said the man. "Oh, no. I was only here on a little matter of business."

"Last time we met," said Pender, "you had business at Rugby." They had fallen into step together, and were walking slowly down to the turning Pender had to take in order to reach his house.

"So I had," agreed the other man. "My business takes me all over the country. I never know where I may be wanted next."

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"It was while you were at Rugby that old Brittlesea was found dead in his bath, wasn't it?" remarked Pender, carelessly.

"Yes. Funny thing, coincidence." The man glanced up at him sideways through his glittering glasses. "Left all his money to his wife, didn't he? She's a rich woman now. Good-looking girl—a lot younger than he was."

They were passing Pender's gate. "Come in and have a drink," said Pender, and again immediately regretted the impulse.

The man accepted, and they went into Pender's bachelor study.

"Remarkable lot of these bath-deaths there have been lately, haven't there?" observed Pender carelessly, as he splashed soda into the tumblers.

"You think it's remarkable?" said the man, with his usual irritating trick of querying everything that was said to him. "Well, I don't know. Perhaps it is. But it's always a fairly common accident."

"I suppose I've been taking more notice on account of that conversation we had in the train." Pender laughed, a little self-consciously. "It just makes me wonder—you know how one does—whether anybody else had happened to hit on that drug you mentioned—what was its name?"

The man ignored the question.

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," he said. "I fancy I'm the only person who knows about that. I only stumbled on the thing by accident myself when I was looking for something else. I don't imagine it could have been discovered simultaneously in so many parts of the country. But all these verdicts just show, don't they, what a safe way it would be of getting rid of a person."

"You're a chemist, then?" asked Pender, catching

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at the one phrase which seemed to promise information.

"Oh, I'm a bit of everything. Sort of general utility man. I do a good bit of studying on my own, too. You've got one or two interesting books here, I see."

Pender was flattered. For a man in his position—he had been in a bank until he came into that little bit of money—he felt that he had improved his mind to some purpose, and he knew that his collection of modern first editions would be worth money some day. He went over to the glass-fronted bookcase and pulled out a volume or two to show his visitor.

The man displayed intelligence, and presently joined him in front of the shelves.

"These, I take it, represent your personal tastes?" He took down a volume of Henry James and glanced at the fly-leaf. "That your name? E. Pender?"

Pender admitted that it was. "You have the advantage of me," he added.

"Oh! I am one of the great Smith clan," said the other with a laugh, "and work for my bread. You seem to be very nicely fixed here."

Pender explained about the clerkship and the legacy.

"Very nice, isn't it?" said Smith. "Not married? No. You're one of the lucky ones. Not likely to be needing any sulphate of . . . any useful drugs in the near future. And you never will, if you stick to what you've got and keep off women and speculation."

He smiled up sideways at Pender. Now that his hat was off, Pender saw that he had a quantity of closely curled grey hair, which made him look older than he had appeared in the railway carriage.

"No, I shan't be coming to you for assistance yet

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awhile," said Pender, laughing. "Besides, how should I find you if I wanted you?"

"You wouldn't have to," said Smith. "*I should find you.* There's never any difficulty about that." He grinned, oddly. "Well, I'd better be getting on. Thank you for your hospitality. I don't expect we shall meet again—but we may, of course. Things work out so queerly, don't they?"

When he had gone, Pender returned to his own arm-chair. He took up his glass of whisky, which stood there nearly full.

"Funny!" he said to himself. "I don't remember pouring that out. I suppose I got interested and did it mechanically." He emptied his glass slowly, thinking about Smith.

What in the world was Smith doing at Skimmings's house?

An odd business altogether. If Skimmings's housekeeper had known about that money. . . . But she had not known, and if she had, how could she have found out about Smith and his sulphate of . . . the word had been on the tip of his tongue then.

"You would not need to find me. *I should find you.*" What had the man meant by that? But this was ridiculous. Smith was not the devil, presumably. But if he really had this secret—if he liked to put a price upon it—nonsense!

"Business at Rugby—a little bit of business at Skimmings's house." Oh, absurd!

"Nobody is fit to be trusted. *Absolute* power over another man's life . . . it grows on you."

Lunacy! And, if there was anything in it, the man was mad to tell Pender about it. If Pender chose to speak he could get the fellow hanged. The very existence of Pender would be dangerous.

That whisky!

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More and more, thinking it over, Pender became persuaded that he had never poured it out. Smith must have done it while his back was turned. Why that sudden display of interest in the bookshelves? It had had no connection with anything that had gone before. Now Pender came to think of it, it had been a very stiff whisky. Was it imagination, or had there been something about the flavour of it?

A cold sweat broke out on Pender's forehead.

A quarter of an hour later, after a powerful dose of mustard and water, Pender was downstairs again, very cold and shivering, huddling over the fire. He had had a narrow escape—if he had escaped. He did not know how the stuff worked, but he would not take a hot bath again for some days. One never knew.

Whether the mustard and water had done the trick in time, or whether the hot bath was an essential part of the treatment, at any rate Pender's life was saved for the time being. But he was still uneasy. He kept the front door on the chain and warned his servant to let no strangers into the house.

He ordered two more morning papers and the *News of the World* on Sundays, and kept a careful watch upon their columns. Deaths in baths became an obsession with him. He neglected his first editions and took to attending inquests.

Three weeks later he found himself at Lincoln. A man had died of heart failure in a Turkish bath—a fat man, of sedentary habits. The jury added a rider to their verdict of Misadventure to the effect that the management should exercise a stricter supervision over the bathers and should never permit them to be left unattended in the hot room.

As Pender emerged from the hall he saw ahead of him a

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shabby hat that seemed familiar. He plunged after it, and caught Mr. Smith about to step into a taxi.

"Smith," he cried, gasping a little. He clutched him fiercely by the shoulder.

"What, you again?" said Smith. "Taking notes of the case, eh? *Can I do anything for you?*"

"You devil!" said Pender. "You're mixed up in this! You tried to kill me the other day."

"Did I? Why should I do that?"

"You'll swing for this," shouted Pender, menacingly.

A policeman pushed his way through the gathering crowd.

"Here!" said he, "what's all this about?"

Smith touched his forehead significantly.

"It's all right, officer," said he. "The gentleman seems to think I'm here for no good. Here's my card. The coroner knows me. But he attacked me. You'd better keep an eye on him."

"That's right," said a bystander.

"This man tried to kill me," said Pender.

The policeman nodded.

"Don't you worry about that, sir," he said. "You think better of it. The 'eat in there has upset you a bit. All right, *all* right."

"But I want to charge him," said Pender.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," said the policeman.

"I tell you", said Pender, "that this man Smith has been trying to poison me. He's a murderer. He's poisoned scores of people."

The policeman winked at Smith.

"Best be off, sir," he said. "I'll settle this. Now, my lad"—and he held Pender firmly by the arms—"just you keep cool and take it quiet. That gentleman's name ain't Smith

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nor nothing like it. You've got a bit mixed up like."

"Well, what is his name?" demanded Pender.

"Never you mind," replied the constable. "You leave him alone, or you'll be getting yourself into trouble."

The taxi had driven away. Pender glanced round at the circle of amused faces and gave in.

"All right, officer," he said. "I won't give you any trouble. I'll come round with you to the police station and tell you about it."

"What do you think o' that one?" asked the inspector of the sergeant when Pender had stumbled out of the station.

"Up the pole an' halfway round the flag, if you ask me," replied his subordinate. "Got one o' them ideez fix what they talk about."

"H'm!" replied the inspector. "Well, we've got his name and address. Better make a note of 'em. He might turn up again. Poisoning people so as they die in their baths, eh? That's a pretty good 'un. Wonderful how these barmy ones thinks it all out, isn't it?"

The spring that year was a bad one—cold and foggy. It was March when Pender went down to an inquest at Deptford, but a thick blanket of mist was hanging over the river as though it were November. The cold ate into your bones. As he sat in the dingy little court, peering through the yellow twilight of gas and fog, he could scarcely see the witnesses as they came to the table. Everybody in the place seemed to be coughing. Pender was coughing too. His bones ached, and he felt as though he were about due for a bout of influenza.

Straining his eyes, he thought he recognized a face on the other side of the room, but the smarting fog which penetrated every crack stung and blinded him. He felt in his overcoat pocket, and his hand closed comfortably on

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something thick and heavy. Ever since that day in Lincoln he had gone about armed for protection. Not a revolver—he was no hand with firearms. A sandbag was much better. He had bought one from an old man wheeling a barrow.

It was meant for keeping out draughts from the door—a good, old-fashioned affair.

The inevitable verdict was returned. The spectators began to push their way out. Pender had to hurry now, not to lose sight of his man. He elbowed his way along, muttering apologies. At the door he almost touched the man, but a stout woman intervened. He plunged past her, and she gave a little squeak of indignation. The man in front turned his head, and the light over the door glinted on his glasses.

Pender pulled his hat over his eyes and followed. His shoes had crêpe rubber soles and made no sound on the sticky pavement. The man went on, jogging quietly up one street and down another, and never looking back. The fog was so thick that Pender was forced to keep within a few yards of him. Where was he going? Into the lighted streets? Home by bus or tram?

No. He turned off to the left, down a narrow street.

The fog was thicker here. Pender could no longer see his quarry, but he heard the footsteps going on before him at the same even pace. It seemed to him that they two were alone in the world—pursued and pursuer, slayer and avenger. The street began to slope more rapidly. They must be coming out somewhere near the river.

Suddenly the dim shapes of the houses fell away on either side. There was an open space with a lamp vaguely visible in the middle. The footsteps paused. Pender, silently hurrying after, saw the man standing close beneath the lamp, apparently consulting something in a notebook.

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Four steps and Pender was upon him. He drew the sandbag from his pocket.

The man looked up.

"I've got you this time," said Pender, and struck with all his force.

Pender had been quite right. He did get influenza. It was a week before he was out and about again. The weather had changed, and the air was fresh and sweet. In spite of the weakness left by the malady he felt as though a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He tottered down to a favourite bookshop of his in the Strand, and picked up a D. H. Lawrence "first" at a price which he knew to be a bargain. Encouraged by this, he turned into a small chop-house, chiefly frequented by Fleet Street men, and ordered a grilled cutlet and a half-tankard of bitter.

Two journalists were seated at the next table.

"Going to poor old Buckley's funeral?" asked one.

"Yes," said the other. "Poor devil. Fancy his getting sloshed on the head like that. He must have been on his way down to interview the widow of that fellow who died in a bath. It's a rough district. Probably one of Jimmy the Card's crowd had it in for him. He was a great crime-reporter—they won't get another like Bill Buckley in a hurry."

"He was a decent sort, too. Great old sport. No end of a leg-puller. Remember his great stunt about sulphate of thanatol?"

Pender started. *That* was the word that had eluded him for so many months. A curious dizziness came over him and he took a pull at the tankard to steady himself.

". . . Looking at you as sober as a judge," the journalist was saying. "He used to work off that wheeze on poor

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boobs in railway carriages to see how they'd take it. Would you believe that one chap actually offered him——"

"Hullo!" interrupted his friend. "That bloke over there has fainted. I thought he was looking a bit white."

"I even a boy, who tells you this,

that I saw a girl which is full of bliss, (girl)

One day She was wandering in the college

when she was reading in the college.

She was searching for a secret thing

which she was sure of being.

It is nothing
but a sign of

nothing.

Brilliant

BY
OSCAR SCHISGALL



THE CLAW OF THE CONDOR

When Charlie Codwell swung off the train at Pleyton, with a gladstone bag in his hand, he knew he was plunging into trouble. It was inevitable, and so he faced it stoically.

"After all," he had reasoned with his partner, Stacey Trent, that morning, "that's what we solicitors are for. We're supposed to push our heads into other people's troubles and to keep them out of jail."

"But this", the grey-haired Trent had assured him, "won't be a criminal case, Charlie."

"How do you know?"

"Jordan McKane has too much sense and money to become involved in anything crooked. You know who he is, don't you?"

"Of course. Big game hunter——"

"Exactly. I've known him a good many years. You'll probably find he wants to discuss something pretty commonplace."

"Listen," Charlie had grunted. "McKane certainly didn't telephone for a solicitor to travel ninety miles to talk about tiddley-winks."

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Convinced of this, he felt prepared for drama when, at nine o'clock that night, he reached the village of Pleyton.

He was the only passenger to leave the train. A heavy rain hammered through the darkness. It bubbled on the station platform like boiling water; and where Charlie alighted there was no shelter.

"Still the old luck," he thought. "I never land where it's safe." He clutched his coat collar tightly around his throat and raced fifty yards for the protection of the booking-office. There he stopped, drenched and a little breathless, to look about for the man who was to meet him. Either Mr. McKane himself, Trent had said, or his chauffeur.

But peering along the length of the platform. Charlie Codwell could see nobody; that is, nobody save the station master, up near the guard's van, and a girl. . . .

The girl, he noted with some astonishment, was hurriedly approaching him.

"Mr. Trent?" she asked quickly.

"Why, no. I'm Mr. Trent's partner—Charles Codwell."

"Oh!" Her sudden smile was like a flash of sunlight through the darkness and rain. She extended a gloved hand. "How do you do? I'm Claire McKane. . . .

"Sorry Dad couldn't get here himself in this weather—he's got a touch of the old jungle fever again. So I'm the reception committee."

"Proving", thought Charlie as he squeezed her hand, "that even jungle fever has its bright side."

Aloud, however, he said something much more restrained.

They hurried through the thrashing downpour to a low-slung, powerful coupé. And his eyes, lively with surprise,

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decided that Claire McKane was as lovely a figure as they had ever beheld.

She wore a belted green macintosh, gleaming wet with rain, and a cleverly tilted green beret. Moreover, she was slim and erect and had a most bewitching profile.

"Dad told me he was expecting Mr. Trent," she admitted as they drove away. "You certainly didn't resemble the tall, grey-haired man of fifty he described. But, then, you were the only passenger, so I took a chance."

Charlie smiled.

"Trent", he explained, "is overburdened with work just now, and he asked me to run up in his place. I'm just the junior partner. Nobody ever notices whether I'm around or not, anyhow. But of course", he added more soberly, "if your father wanted to see Trent on a personal matter——"

"I can't tell you *what* it is!"

The peculiar emphasis of her words and the fact that she suddenly frowned caused Charlie Codwell to glance at the girl in perplexity. He saw her jam down the accelerator with grim recklessness.

Her mouth hardened, and she drove fast—much too fast, he thought, for a night so wet and slippery. The tyres hissed savagely. And the road she followed was dark, curving endlessly among the black trees of a forest.

"You appear", he observed, "interestingly worried."

"I am! Worried and annoyed."

He waited expectantly; yet she drove fully a hundred yards before she added:

"I'm not used to seeing Dad as upset as he's been the past few days. Usually he tells me things. But this time he's worse than the Sphinx."

"His health, perhaps——?"

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"Oh, no! He's had this jungle fever on and off for eighteen years. It isn't anything very serious; troubles him for a few days, then vanishes. . . . No, it's something else, Mr. Codwell. It's something I—I don't understand!"

He meditated over this in silence, remembering that Jordan McKane had wanted the advice of a solicitor who dealt mainly with criminal matters. And as they sped around a long curve, the girl said:

"I thought *you* might know what it is."

"I——?" in surprise.

"Well, he must have explained it to you over the telephone." She darted a quick look at him. "Didn't he?"

"As a matter of fact", said Charlie, "your father spoke to Trent, not to me. And I don't think he told Trent anything. Simply insisted that one of us hurry up here to give him some advice. That's all I know, Miss McKane."

She was very clearly disappointed. He saw her teeth press into her lip, and for several minutes she drove without talking. They climbed a hill and started down its far side before, of a sudden, she tossed back her head and forced a smile.

"Oh," she decided, without much conviction, "let's not be moody about it! I'm sorry. I'm supposed to be playing the gay hostess, and look at me!"

"I am," Charlie assured her, "very closely."

She smiled more warmly. "So I've noticed. . . . Well, you'd better begin drawing a deep breath, Mr. Codwell. In a few minutes you'll find yourself in one of England's craziest households. I hope you don't mind sleeping with a jaguar's roars in your ears."

"Never tried it," he laughed. "Does it sound much like the Tube?"

"We-el, when *all* Dad's animals decide to talk at once,

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there's quite a din. You know, I suppose, that we have a complete noisy and smelly menagerie?"

"Trent told me about it," Charlie said. "From what I gather your father must be a remarkable man."

"He is!" Claire spoke with pride. "He's one of the few men in England who bring jungle beasts back alive. Eventually he sells them to zoos, of course. But Dad likes to keep them for a month or two first, to study their habits."

"Primarily, you know, he's a naturalist. Just now he has a tremendous Brazilian collection under observation. He arrived with them three weeks ago. A couple of jaguars, a condor, snakes, monkeys, scorpions—oh, everything!"

"Pardon me," said Charlie, "if I seem to shiver. Where does he keep these precious pets? I mean, am I apt to share a bedroom with a scorpion?"

The girl laughed enchantingly.

"Oh," she explained, "we have a special building for them behind the house. They're in separate cages. The only one who really lives with them is Milo Sabatéo."

"Milo. . . .?"

"He's a Brazilian—half Indian, I believe. But he certainly understands animals! Dad's had Milo for nine years."

Charlie Codwell, peering into the darkness ahead, began to perceive that whatever his interview with Jordan McKane might yield, it would assuredly produce a startling background. A menagerie of untamed jungle beasts, a Brazilian half-breed, and a celebrated animal hunter all gathered on an isolated estate some fifteen miles out of Pleyton.

He felt, almost, as though he were speeding into a land of unrealities. A land of nightmares. Its only promise

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of normality, so far, was this exquisite girl at his side.

He offered her a cigarette, which she refused, and then, as he lit his own, he ventured:

"Your home must be overrun by sightseers. I can picture them coming with monkeynuts——"

"Dad won't permit sightseers," she said decisively. "He entertains only invited guests—and usually one at a time. This week, for example, we have only Dr. William Todd."

"Yes. Trent mentioned him. A scientist, isn't he?"

"He's curator of a zoo that's going to buy part of Dad's collection. You'll find Dr. Todd very pleasant, though a bit—well, eccentric, I'm afraid. But, then, I take it your business will be only with Dad and Harvey."

Charlie raised his brows and took the cigarette from his lips. This was the first he had heard of a "Harvey" in the case, he confessed. "Who is he?"

"Why——" The girl hesitated, clearly surprised. "Why, I thought you knew. Harvey Anderson is Dad's assistant. Also, he's—er——"

"Er——?"

"He's—my fiancé."

"O-oh," said Charlie, and was somewhat startled to hear the empty collapse of his voice. He looked at the wet road ahead a little blankly. He looked back at the girl again, as if bewildered. Then he shifted his position, repeated "Oh", and subsided. . . .

For the rest of the drive their conversation became rather desultory. Charlie smoked and did not straighten his relaxed attitude until they swung into an entrance between high brick walls. Such walls, he supposed, were intended as a barricade, should any of Jordan McKane's animals manage to escape.

They rode up a gravelled drive to a white mansion

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half hidden behind huge naked trees. By the time he emerged from the car, the girl had run up four steps to the dark, sheltered porch and was ringing a bell.

"Leave your bag, Mr. Codwell," she called. "I'll send Quincy for it."

But Charlie carried the gladstone up to a door which was opened, after an inordinate delay, by a lean, grey-haired man in a swallowtail coat. This was Adam Quincy. He bowed as they entered, and took the visitor's bag with the insistence of an hotel porter.

"Where's Dad, Quincy?"

"Don't know, Miss Claire," he replied. "Upstairs, I expect. I'll go on up and tell him——"

"Never mind. You take Mr. Codwell's things and show him into the library."

With a smile and a nod to Charlie, she ran swiftly up the broad staircase. As he relinquished his wet garments to Quincy, he stared after her green-clad figure with unabashed admiration. She was as graceful as a nymph. Lucky chap, this Harvey Anderson, he thought. . . .

"There's the library, sir," said Quincy.

"Eh? . . . Oh, thanks."

Rubbing the cold out of his hands, Charlie advanced into a low-ceilinged room almost completely walled with books. A merry, crackling fire danced on a tremendous hearth, and towards this he instinctively made his way. His lithe young body still tingled with the rawness of the night.

But Charlie Codwell never reached the fire.

Half way across the room he stopped abruptly, staring wide-eyed. What he saw brought a shock of horror that stunned his senses. He stood utterly motionless. He felt his muscles freeze.

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Then, with the breath bursting out of his chest on a husky ejaculation, he started forward—only to halt again and gape.

In a far corner a man lay, crumpled in blood! . . .

A man whose throat had been horribly mangled, as if by long, cruel talons, so that rivers of red had spilled down his chest and over the floor.

A man whom Charlie instantly recognized as Jordan McKane!

"Good Lord!"

The words burst from Charlie Codwell in a choked whisper. As he stared at that hideous thing, he felt cold and hot and cold again. His whole being thundered furiously. For he knew Jordan McKane was dead!

There was death in the very attitude of the body, so crazily huddled on its side. The luxuriant white hair lay dipped in a stream of sticky crimson, and one knee was drawn up as high as the chest.

Charlie found himself fiercely gripping the back of a chair. His cheeks blazed as if the flames of the hearth had leaped up to scorch them.

How long he stood there, paralysed, he did not know. But at last, when his mind broke free from the chaos, he sprang forward.

He knelt, trembling, to seek a pulse-beat in McKane's wrist. But the effort was futile. The man's flesh had already begun to grow cold.

Then Charlie began to see things. Two overturned lamps. A few scattered books, fallen out of a case. And—a revolver on the floor, within six inches of Jordan McKane's limp fingers!

It was strange that in the midst of such confusion he should think wildly of the girl who had just gone upstairs.

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In a moment *she* would see this wreck of her father. . . .

But the thought was shattered by a hoarse, stifled cry behind him. He whirled around to see Quincy in the door. The gaunt manservant had just entered. He stood with hands raised, eyes bulging in terror. He was shaking so violently that his very teeth chattered.

"G-great Lord!"

"He's dead!" Charlie rasped. "Come in and shut that door!"

"D-d-dead!"

"Come here!" Charlie shot through his teeth. "Do you know anything about this?"

"N-n-no, sir!" Quincy's voice was frantically high-pitched. "I swear before heaven I d-don't! I——" His stammering continued in panic, but Charlie Codwell swung back to glare again at the body.

Those deep, hideous lacerations in the throat had ripped open the jugular vein—so much was sickeningly clear. But *who* could have clawed so fiendishly at the man? Or what? . . .

It was inevitable, as he looked at those brutal gashes, that visions of the beasts in the menagerie should flash upon Charlie. They left him dumbfounded.

But he had little time to think now. The excitement of the night was just beginning, and it swept him into its fury.

At that instant there tore through the house a scream so piercing that it wiped all conjecture out of his mind. The shriek came from the upper floor. And he knew, with a pang, it was Claire McKane's!

Sheer impulse—and a kind of terror—drove him out of the library and up the stairs. He took three steps at each bound, with Quincy following. When he reached the upper

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floor, his eyes were flaming; his breath issued in wild spurts. He found himself desperately wishing he had stopped to pick up that revolver——

Then he saw Claire McKane.

Still in her green mackintosh, she was in the corridor, holding a door shut. Holding it as though someone inside were trying to tug it open. Her eyes were flashing in a pallid face.

“What is it?” Charlie gasped.

“*The Condor.*”

“Wha-at?”

“It’s free!” she cried. “It’s in there! It—it almost clawed my face when I went in!”

When he heard that, lightning blazed in Charlie’s mind. It brought a frightful glimpse of Jordan McKane’s throat being slashed by the grasping talons of the great vulture. Of Jordan McKane trying to shoot the bird as it buried its claws in his neck! Was that the background of the gruesome tableau in the library? . . .

Somehow Charlie could not immediately blurt the news of the tragedy to the girl. It was the one moment in the night when he found his courage definitely lacking.

With crazy throbbings in his chest, he turned to the door she held. He was vaguely aware of two men running down the corridor—one young and blond and hard-muscled, like a Viking; the other elderly and very badly frightened: Harvey Anderson and Dr. William Todd, he guessed.

But he granted them little attention. He wanted to see the condor’s claws. If they were bloody, he realized, the death downstairs would be explained.

As he put his hand on the door knob, Claire McKane gasped:

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"Don't!"

"I've got to look at that bird."

"You can't! He'll fly at you! He'll——"

"Don't worry about that," he flung out, almost harshly, and thrust her back. "I've got to do this!"

He pushed the door open little by little, an inch at a time, until it was wide enough to afford him a glimpse of the room. The light from the corridor poured into the place. Behind him the two men and Claire stood suddenly hushed, watching.

Then Charlie saw the bird; and the sight left him rigid with awe.

The condor had perched itself on the back of a bed. Its great black wings, measuring fully ten feet from tip to tip, were spread across the room. Whenever they moved, monstrous shadows swayed on the wall.

Its evil head, as naked as a buzzard's, was thrust forward so that the eyes glared viciously at the door. The whole scene was like something out of a terrified dream; something only a crazed imagination could conceive.

Charlie held his breath. His stupefied gaze dropped slowly from the condor's head over its fat body to the claws. The long talons grasped the bedstead. Black and cruel, they looked capable of tearing a man's whole body apart.

Charlie gaped in amazement. True, the room was shadowy, and he could not discern details clearly. Yet, though he strained his eyes, he was quite sure of one thing:

He could see no blood on those talons!

Had the bird pecked its claws clean? Had the blood been wiped off by whatever objects the macabre creature had seized? Or was it possible that——

Of a sudden the room was filled with terrific flappings.

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The condor leaped from its perch to fling itself forward—and Charlie, with a wild start of his own, pulled the door shut with a bang.

He could distinctly hear the thud of the bird's heavy body against the wood, the pecking of the huge beak, the savage, frustrated scratching of talons.

When he turned, shaken and pale, those behind him were talking in a kind of panic. He heard the blond young man rasp:

"It can't get out of there! The windows are shuttered!" Then, swinging to Quincy, he demanded, "Where the devil is Milo?"

"I d-don't know, sir! I——"

"Don't stand there jabbering! Find him! He's the only one who can handle that damned bird!"

"In j-just a minute, Mr. Codwell," the old man pleaded in misery. He was gesticulating ineffectually towards the stairs. "I—I've got to tell Miss Claire——"

Charlie cut in, "All right, Quincy, I'll tell her. You'd better find Milo."

The servant still hesitated; but meeting Charlie's reassuring eyes, he gulped wretchedly, nodded, and turned away. Clearly, he did not desire the task of informing Claire McKane of her father's death. And as Quincy moved off to seek Milo Sabatéo, the keeper of the McKane menagerie, Charlie grimly faced the girl.

Much as he hated this duty, it could be neither avoided nor delayed. He told her, as gently as he could, of the tragedy in the library.

At his first words her features went deathly white. Her hand leaped to her lips as if to crush a scream. But no sound, not even a whisper, escaped her.

For a second, as she swayed against the bulky body of

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Harvey Anderson, Charlie feared she was going to faint. The next moment, however, she was flying wildly, in reckless horror, down the stairs; and Anderson was racing after her with hoarse supplications to be careful, to restrain herself, to wait. . . .

Charlie Codwell did not stir.

He stood colourless, breathing hard. His first inclination was to follow the girl, as Anderson had done. He was restrained only by the thought that, at so dreadful a time, she might better be left to the solace of her fiancé.

So he drew a deep, quivering breath, wiped a film of perspiration from his forehead, and looked at the dazed Dr. Todd.

One question pounded madly in his mind:

Had the condor really killed Jordan McKane? Or were its bloodless claws evidence that the man had been murdered by some other assailant?

He turned and looked grimly at the closed door and remembered again that to-day Jordan McKane had desperately called for the advice of a solicitor. . . .

Dr. William Todd was very slight and small and round-shouldered. He had a pale, scholarly countenance above which gleamed the yellow baldness of an extraordinarily high skull. A timid man, one would have guessed at a glance, and gentle. His attire was dark and conservative, the only hint of adornment being the black ribbon of his pince-nez.

And these glasses, precariously perched on his nose, magnified his eyes enormously. Just now he stood at the head of the stairs, hesitating painfully in the matter of going down to view the gruesome corpse.

"This is frightful!" he kept whispering in hushed horror. "It's positively frightful!"

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"It's hell," Charlie bluntly agreed.

Dr. Todd turned to gape at him. "I—I take it you're the solicitor Mr. McKane was expecting?"

"Yes."

The elderly man appeared to consider this a while; then he shook his bald head wretchedly.

"I shouldn't have thought it possible!" he said.

"You shouldn't have thought what possible?"

"That the condor could escape from its cage! We ought to—to shoot the bird before it attacks somebody else!"

"Shooting it may be all right," Charlie snapped with a frown. "But we're only guessing—we don't really know it was the condor that attacked Mr. McKane."

Dr. Todd, visibly trembling, widened his eyes in bewilderment. He seemed to forget that he had been about to go downstairs.

Returning a step or two he protested: "But really, now! You can't believe—I mean—you said yourself the throat had been horribly mangled by claws. Surely, with that—that awful bird free in the house——"

Charlie grunted. He was in no humour for debate. Besides, his mind was several strides ahead of Dr. Todd's. He swung a quick glance down the stairs, then looked back at the timorous scientist.

"Listen, Doctor," he asked, softly, "were you in the house all the evening?"

"Yes, of course!"

"What part of the house?"

"In my room on the floor above."

"Door open?"

"Well, now, let me see." Dr. Todd plucked nervously at his lip, then suddenly lowered his hand to rub the side of his

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trousers. "It must have been, I imagine. Why do you ask?"

"Didn't you hear some sort of disturbance downstairs?"

"Why, no-o——"

"Nothing unusual at all?"

"Not a thing!" Dr. Todd stammered, his eyes blinking rapidly. "Harvey Anderson was with me. He was telling me the story of his expedition to Brazil with Mr. McKane. I'm sure if there had been any—er—commotion, we'd have heard it!"

"You mean Anderson was with you all the evening?"

"Er—no. Oh, no. He came up—let me see—about half an hour ago, I should say. Or it may have been a little more. I'm not sure."

Charlie Codwell scowled at the floor. His mind was racing now; racing nearer and nearer the conviction that it was *not* the condor which had killed Jordan McKane. He muttered, more to himself than to Dr. Todd:

"It's illogical. You say you heard nothing. Yet McKane wouldn't have fought the bird without letting out a scream for help."

"He—he might have been clawed before he had *time* to make an outcry! When a condor attacks——"

"No," Charlie said emphatically. "He had time, all right."

"How can you know?"

"Because he had time to get a revolver; there's one lying beside his body downstairs. That means he certainly had time enough to yell!"

Dr. William Todd did not enjoy mystery. He rubbed his palms together nervously, rapidly, and his teeth chewed at his lips. Once he looked down the stairs, as though thinking a view of the body might be more pleasant than a discussion of this sort.

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"Good heavens, sir!" he complained a little harshly. "You're making things seem even more appalling than they are!"

"I couldn't," Charlie assured him. Then he reached an abrupt decision. "Look here, Doctor. Will you go down and phone the police? They'll have to be notified of this at once, whatever the explanation may be."

"Yes. Yes, certainly."

"I want to have a look at the condor's cage, meanwhile. One of the things we'll have to learn is how the bird got out. How do I get to the menagerie?"

In an unsteady voice, Dr. Todd instructed him to go down the back steps, the animal collection being quartered directly behind the house. Charlie nodded and left.

As he hurried down those narrow stairs it scarcely occurred to him that he was assuming the role of detective. His face was pale; his eyes were abnormally bright.

But his mind was swiftly recovering from the shocks of the past quarter of an hour, and its ideas became vivid. Terrifying, too. He was seeing too many possibilities. . . .

The menagerie—a long, concrete structure like a tremendous barn—was brilliantly illuminated, every electric bulb in the place blazing.

When Charlie Codwell darted through the rain and entered the building, he found himself alone; alone, that is, with a bewildering collection of jungle beasts.

Of Milo Sabatéó, the keeper, there was no sign.

Charlie stood still a moment, staring in wonder. There was an overpowering animal smell that all but made him wince. Steel cages of varying sizes lined the walls, most of them now occupied.

At his left two jaguars paced back and forth, back and forth,

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tirelessly, sometimes raising their ferocious heads to snarl.

Then came dozens of monkeys leaping in mad revel; and farther, a puma. One tremendous cage, finely meshed, was kaleidoscopic with birds whose plumage was incredibly brilliant: macaws, parrakeets, egrets, and even two tall jabiru storks.

Besides bush deer and strange red squirrels, the collection comprised a variety of species Charlie could not identify. And at the far end of this amazing place he saw the glass cases which he knew contained the reptiles.

But he could not discover the cage that must have confined the condor!

True, several of these iron-barred prisons were empty. When he approached them, frowning intently, they did not appear to have been recently used. They were too clean, showing not even signs of fallen feathers.

He did, however, find an unoccupied space where, apparently, a cage *had* stood. . . . And this discovery surprised him with a new possibility.

Glancing to his left, he saw that one end of the building had two portals, like garage doors, through which any of these cages might easily be wheeled. He was just contemplating this startling new idea when he heard quick steps behind him.

Charlie spun around—and faced old Quincy. Quincy in a voluminous raincoat that hung loosely around his gaunt figure. The servant looked more terrified than ever; and at the sight of Charlie he gasped hoarsely:

“Mr. Codwell!”

“What’s the matter?”—sharply.

“For—for the Lord’s sake, sir, will you come out here?” Quincy’s eyes bulged like eggs. “It—it’s Milo! Milo Sabatéo! I—I think he’s *dead!*”

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For a second Charlie Codwell could not speak. His whole body stiffened. Then, in a husky whisper, he managed to force out:

"Where?"

"Out there, under the trees!"

Charlie asked no more questions. Uttering a little rasp, he ran out into the rain. He had imagined his nerves had passed the climax of their agitation, but they were quivering now as violently as ever. His face was grey, hard as rock.

With Quincy guiding, they hurried into dense, blinding blackness. The old man seemed to find his way by instinct, his eyes shining like a cat's. He was breathing audibly and suddenly he warned:

"Mind that cage!"

He spoke just in time, for Charlie all but collided with steel bars. He stopped within a yard of the large cage, and a curious thrill raced through him.

The thing was mounted on wheels. It could easily have been drawn out of that concrete building, he saw; and the condor might have been released—— But this was no time for theorizing.

"Where's Milo?" he rapped out.

"The—the other side of the cage," hoarsely whispered Quincy. "Look out!"

They found the small Brazilian sprawling on his back in the mud. Charlie's heart thudded stormily as he knelt beside that figure.

He remembered a lighter in his pocket, and this he struck with unsteady fingers under the shelter of Quincy's great coat. The servant held the tiny flame there, protected from the rain, and by its pale glow, Charlie tensely examined Milo Sabatéo.

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"He's not dead!" he instantly discovered. "He's breathing!"

He bent over the Brazilian eagerly. A half-breed, Milo had skin the colour of coffee. His countenance was thin, aquiline, and finely moulded.

But it was marred now by two vicious bruises that explained his unconsciousness. One was a gash in the forehead, between the eyes; the other was a hideous welt half hidden under the glossy black Indian hair.

"Something mighty hard must have hit him," Charlie muttered grimly.

"There it is!" Quincy ejaculated. "Look, Mr. Codwell—the fire-prongs! That's what hit him, all right—them fire-prongs there!"

Charlie jerked his head around to peer at the thing the old servant indicated. It lay near Milo Sabatéo's feet, glinting in the lighter's feeble flame: a long steel fork with three prongs, modelled after Neptune's trident.

"Where does that come from, Quincy?" he exclaimed.

"The fireplace——"

"In the library?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Charlie straightened with a peculiar sound in his throat, his eyes flashing. He picked up the fork, eyed it a second, then thrust it under his arm. It was some thirty inches long and surprisingly heavy; a very serviceable weapon.

"All right, Quincy," he said quickly. "Let's get Milo inside. You'd better phone for a doctor, unless Dr. Todd can look after these wounds."

"Dr. Todd ain't a medical man, sir," Quincy panted as he raised the Brazilian's legs. "I'll get the—the family doctor."

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They bore the limp figure of Milo Sabatéo through the rain and darkness to the back door. As they entered with their burden, Quincy called for Sarah, his wife, who was the McKane cook and housekeeper.

Sarah, however, must have deserted the kitchen to be of help to Clair in the library; and so they carried Milo to his room in the servant's quarters. When they placed him on his bed, Charlie asked how Quincy had chanced to find him.

"Why, I—I was hunting for Milo, sir, to come and fetch that there condor," the gaunt butler excitedly explained. "He wasn't in the house and he wasn't in the menagerie. I turned up all the lights there to see.

"Then I went out and almost fell over him alongside that cage. It sure gave me the shivers! I saw you through the windows of the menagerie then, and I went for you sir."

Charlie nodded.

"All right, Quincy. I'll take care of his head while you phone the doctor. Make it quick."

He found an antiseptic and a clean towel in the servants' bathroom. While he applied these to the Brazilian's wounds, a hundred thoughts swarmed through his mind. The most stirring of them was this: When Milo Sabatéo regained his senses, he might be able to clarify a great part of this mystery.

He would be able to tell who had attacked him. He might know how the condor had got into the house. He might even know how Jordan McKane had died!

Yes. It suddenly became manifest that much, very much depended on this comatose man. Charlie ministered to his wounds earnestly. But the brown-skinned face gave no hint, not even a flicker, of returning consciousness. . . .

When Quincy hurried back, he was accompanied by the

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tremulous Dr. William Todd. "Dr. Pemberton 'll be over as soon as he can get here, sir," the old servant reported.

"And the police sergeant is on his way out from Pleyton!" added Dr. Todd, breathless with excitement. "Heavens, this is frightful, Mr. Codwell, frightful!"

Charlie said nothing. He straightened, his frown fastened on Milo's immobile face. Several seconds of silence passed before he finally turned to ask Dr. Todd:

"Is Miss McKane still in the library?"

"Oh, no," the doctor whispered. "She almost collapsed when—when she saw her father like that. Lord, isn't it horrible?" Todd actually shuddered. "Anderson made her go up to her room. Sarah, the cook, is with her, I think."

"And who's with the body now?"

"Why, Mr. Anderson."

"Is he——"

Charlie Codwell did not finish the question. He could not. For at that instant a new sound cracked through this house of horrors; a sound that made them all whirl around, staring.

It came twice, three times, explosively sharp—*the cracks of a revolver. . . .*

They found Harvey Anderson in the upper corridor, a grim young Viking, his hair dishevelled. He was scowling into the open door of the room that had imprisoned the condor, and a revolver still hung in his hand.

"It was the only thing to do," he rasped when Charlie and Dr. Todd reached him. "That bird was a killer and he had to go! No use trying to keep them once they've tasted—blood!"

Breathless after his alarmed rush up the stairs, Charlie looked into the bedroom. A shiver of revulsion went through him when he saw the condor dead on the floor.

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It lay in a cradle of its own black wings, with two vermillion daubs on its breast. Its terrible talons seemed even now to be clutching at something.

Then he stared down at the weapon in Harvey Anderson's hand; and demanded, "Where did you get that gun?"

"It was on the library floor."

"Is it Mr. McKane's?"

"It *was* Mr. McKane's, yes."

Charlie crushed a harsh reproof behind tight lips. For the moment he said nothing more. Aware of an opportunity, he stepped into the bedroom and switched on the lights. The sudden radiance made him blink.

He went straight to the condor's uplifted claws, bent over them, and subjected them, as well as the rapacious beak, to an intent scrutiny.

When the others entered, in hushed suspense, he said decisively: "Not a sign of blood. Not even on the feathers."

"Meaning——?" demanded Harvey Anderson.

"That the condor probably never touched Mr. McKane."

"Oh, now listen, Mr. Codwell——!"

"Wait. There's something else," Charlie insisted. "I'm no naturalist, but I know that condors—like buzzards—feed on the dead."

"It isn't a pleasant thing to talk about right now. Still, we've got to face it. If this bird had killed Jordan McKane, it would have torn him apart. It wouldn't have flown off to another part of the house."

"Unless", timidly ventured Dr. Todd, "it was—er—frightened away. I mean if somebody came——"

"Whoever came would have seen the bird."

Anderson savagely interrupted, "Mr. Codwell, you can't convince me that anything except this condor ripped up poor Mr. McKane's throat so terribly! Why, it's unthinkable!"

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"If I can't convince you," said Charlie, quietly, "it's pretty pointless to argue. . . . Still, Anderson, whatever you may have thought, you shouldn't have picked up that revolver. You know you're not permitted to disturb anything around a body before the police arrive. Especially a weapon."

Anderson looked down at the gun rather sheepishly, frowned, and grunted.

"Well, maybe you're right," he dourly conceded. "Oh, well, I'm sorry! I just lost my head. Seeing Mr. McKane ripped up like that, and Claire on the verge of collapse, and knowing that bird was still in the house, ready to kill again. . . . I don't know what happened to me. I just grabbed the gun and ran up here and blazed away at the thing!"

There was much to be criticized in such a course, Charlie perceived. As a lawyer, he might have given Anderson an effective lecture on the proceeding. Yet he saw no reason to attempt a reprimand which would more fittingly come from the police.

So, saying nothing, he merely urged these two men out of the room and closed the door behind himself.

As they moved towards the stairs, his hopes darted back to the unconscious Milo Sabatéo. If only the Brazilian would open his eyes and talk! If only he could explain things! . . .

But Milo, it was evident, had not yet regained his senses. For Quincy, who was tending him, had been given explicit instructions to bring word immediately of so much as a stirring; and Quincy had brought no news at all.

So Charlie Codwell's hopes, temporarily blocked in this avenue, sped off to seek new channels.

The result was stimulating. Within two minutes he had

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a fresh idea. Goaded by it, he hurried into the library and crossed the room to the telephone.

The sight of the hideously mangled corpse in the corner caused him a slight shudder. Yet he kept his eyes on it when he gave the London number of his partner, Stacy Trent.

It seemed hours instead of minutes before he secured the connection—only to encounter disappointment. For Trent was not at home. Nor did his housekeeper know at what time he would return.

"Take a message for him, will you, please?" Charlie asked. "Write it down."

"Just a second. . . . Yes, sir. Go ahead."

Charlie dictated:

"Jordan McKane murdered. If you have any information that may help establish a motive for the killing or the identity of the killer, phone me at once. Number is Pleyton 23. Or else rush up here yourself. He's your client. I'm staying to see the thing through."

When Charlie replaced the telephone, Harvey Anderson, who had been watching him with a frown, demanded: "What's the idea of sending for *him*? How the devil do you expect your partner to know anything about this? If we, who were right on the scene, know nothing——"

"You'd be surprised how much more clearly I can sometimes see", softly said Charlie, "through my partner's eyes. . . ."

By the time Police Sergeant Guthrie, of Pleyton, arrived, Charlie Codwell felt as though he had been in this home of terrors for days. It seemed inconceivable that so much

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had happened in the hour and a half since Claire had met him.

Guthrie, whom he appraised without much encouragement, was a long-boned man with a grey moustache, a nasal twang, and an irritating habit of sniffing. Himself in uniform, he came accompanied by Pleyton's entire police force of two men.

His frowning unease as he approached the body, supplemented by that nervous sniffing, indicated that he had little taste for a duty of this kind.

He was followed within a few minutes by Dr. Pemberton, the family physician, who, it appeared, also served the community as local police surgeon. The doctor—large, pompous and somewhat overbearing—swept into the library with all the gusto of an actor making an heroic entrance.

As he threw his hat and coat on a chair, he glowered obliquely at the body and muttered, "Well, this is bad!" Then, crossing the room, he wiped his hands on a handkerchief as though preparing to operate.

Charlie, a little sickened, walked out of the library. He had no desire to witness the gruesome examination. For himself, he had seen enough of that mangled throat. Too much!

He sought out Quincy, asked to be shown his own room, and retired to it for time to marshal his wits for some calm thinking.

When he switched on the light, a glimpse of himself in a mirror caused a veritable shock. His brown hair was crazily dishevelled, sprawling over his head like a wig. His face looked drawn, tense, pale. Moreover, his grey suit had been so thoroughly drenched that it hung about him like sacking.

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"Well!" he mumbled grimly, "greetings to a stranger."

He made whatever hasty adjustments he could with a comb and towel, then lit a cigarette and sank into a chair.

The rain still thrashed the windows savagely. But he scarcely heard it now. He was thinking—thinking about a dozen things at once. And he remained there, lost in speculations, in theories, in hopes, until at last a knock at the door roused him.

It was Quincy.

"Sergeant Guthrie wants you to come down to the drawing-room, please, sir," he said, still shaky in voice. "He's questioned just about everybody except you, sir."

Charlie rose and crushed his cigarette. "All right, Quincy. . . . How's Milo doing?"

"We-el, he's been groaning a little and sort of tossing around," the old servant reported hesitantly. "Dr. Pemberton's with him now. He sure was hit hard, sir!"

"Yes," grunted Charlie. "*Twice.*"

He went down to the drawing-room—instantly to be enveloped by its atmosphere of strain and tension.

The entire household was there; even Clair McKane. She sat rigid as a wax figure, her deathly pallor accentuated by a dark frock. Her eyes, filled with tragedy, were unswervingly fastened on the police official. . . . Charlie looked at her a moment, swallowed a pang, and turned slowly to Guthrie.

"You wanted to see me, Sergeant?"

"Ye-es, I did." The official was frowning worriedly. He stood with his back to the empty fireplace; and after sniffing once or twice, he launched a series of questions which Charlie answered quietly, patiently.

They all led, however, to the sergeant's principal challenge: "From what these folks have been telling me, Mr.

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Codwell, you seem to have some pretty set—eh—opinions about this business. Dr. Todd says you told him the—that condor-bird had nothing to do with the death of Mr. McKane.”

“The doctor misunderstood me,” Charlie corrected. “I said I didn’t think the condor had *killed* Mr. McKane.”

“I reckon you’ve got reasons for saying that?”

“Why—naturally.” But Charlie Codwell sent a hesitant glance at Claire McKane. This seemed a heartless matter to discuss in her presence. The girl must have perceived his reluctance, however, for she stiffened and urged huskily:

“Go on, Mr. Codwell! I—I can stand it. I *want* to know what happened!”

He eyed her uncertainly, until he decided the greater cruelty might lie in keeping her mystified. Then he swung back to the attentive police officer.

“I’ve already mentioned my reasons to Dr. Todd,” he said. “I feel, first, that if Mr. McKane had been attacked by the condor, he would have shouted; and he didn’t. Second, there were no bloodstains on the bird. Third, it habitually devours what it kills, and would have stayed with the body, feeding on it, if it had actually caused the death.”

Guthrie tugged thoughtfully at his ear.

“All that”, he finally admitted, “sounds reasonable enough; but considering the marks on Mr. McKane’s throat, how do you figure he *was* killed?”

“With the fire-prongs.”

A gasp broke from Claire McKane. She leaned forward, her eyes horrified.

“I’m sorry——” Charlie began.

“No, no!”—hoarsely. “Go on!” The girl’s hand seized

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the arm of her chair. "It's dreadful," she cried in a low, anguished voice. "But I—I think you're right!"

"The prongs", Charlie pointed out, "could have produced the same effect as the clawing of talons. That is, if they ripped downward or upward."

Sergeant Guthrie demanded: "Was there any blood on those prongs when you found them?"

"No. But the rain had had time to wash them clean, you know."

"That's so," snapped Guthrie, and scowled. "Reckon it would have wiped out fingerprints too, eh?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"That's rough luck all around. *All* around." The sergeant sniffed impatiently, then consulted a paper on which he had scribbled notes during the inquiry. He rubbed his chin in silence while he scanned a few jottings. And suddenly he straightened with the air of one who intends to be very practical.

"Before we go on guessing", he said, "let's see just what we've got here. The facts I wrote down are these. If I left out anything, tell me." He quoted from his paper:

"Miss McKane left the house at about 8.30 to drive to the station. At that time her father was in the library. He was feeling feverish and generally upset. She got back—bringing you, Mr. Codwell—about 9.20. Right?"

Charlie nodded corroboration.

"So", Sergeant Guthrie announced, "Mr. McKane was killed between 8.30 and 9.20—there's the fifty minutes we've got to account for! According to your testimony here, not one of you people went into the library during that time. Right?"

No one replied.

Guthrie sniffed audibly and went on: "Let's see just

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where you all were. . . . Mr. Anderson, you say you went into the menagerie at about 8.20, just before Miss McKane left. You stayed there talking to Milo Sabatéo about ways of feeding the snakes. About nine o'clock you came back to the house——”

“By the rear door,” Harvey Anderson sharply specified. “I didn’t pass the library. Mr. McKane might already have been dead when I entered!”

Charlie glanced curiously at the blond man; he thought the fellow looked inwardly shaken. . . .

“All right,” Guthrie was conceding, talking to his paper. “You went in the back way, Mr. Anderson, and went straight up to Dr. Todd’s room. You found Dr. Todd packing his bags.”

“Yes.”

“Er—one second——” Hastily the bald scientist lifted a finger, as if begging for attention. “Perhaps I ought to explain I was—er—planning to leave tomorrow——”

“You explained that before,” dryly said Guthrie. “You also said you’d gone up to your room to pack just after supper, and you stayed there. When Mr. Anderson came in, you got to talking about hunting in Brazil, and you talked till you heard Miss McKane scream.”

There the sergeant paused. Charlie was leaning back against the door-jamb, and from that detached position he shot swift, searching glances from one face to another.

So far, he realized, the movements between 8.30 and 9.20 of Dr. Todd, Anderson, and Claire McKane had been accounted for—if *all the alibis were true*. . . .

“As for Quincy and Sarah”, added Guthrie, “they were in the kitchen, eating a late supper and washing up dishes.”

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"Th-that's right sir!" whispered Quincy. "I was helping Sarah."

"You didn't hear any excitement in the library?"

"No, sir; no, sir!" The servant's big eyes bulged as he emphatically shook his grey head. "Lord, was I to hear anything, I'd sure look to see what it was, sir!"

"When did you finally come out of the kitchen?"

"Wh-when Miss Claire rang the bell. Then I went out to open the door."

Suddenly, in a low, quick voice, Charlie Codwell ventured a question of his own. He had no desire to supersede the sergeant; it was merely that the words sprang to his lips:

"Quincy, did anybody else—any visitor—ring the bell while Miss McKane was away?"

"No, sir!"

There was a moment of silence then. Tense silence. Then Dr. Todd cleared a rasp from his throat. Charlie's mouth tightened in queer lines, and he sent an oblique look at Sergeant Guthrie.

For this much was very clear: if Quincy could be believed, if there had been no outsider in the library, then the murder must, quite evidently, have been committed by *somebody in the house!*

Who?

Anderson? Dr. Todd? Quincy himself? . . . Or conceivably Milo Sabaté? . . .

Sergeant Guthrie abruptly sniffed and made a great to-do of stuffing the paper into his pocket. Frowning, he tugged at his ear for a moment, then unexpectedly reverted to another aspect of the mystery.

"That bird," he rasped out, his tone dissatisfied, "if it didn't kill Mr. McKane, I'd like to know what in

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blazes it was doing in the house. How did it get here?"

"Why", Harvey Anderson began, "the cage was pulled out——"

"Sure, I know that!" snapped Guthrie. "Somebody hauled it out of the menagerie. He had luck too, because his footprints are pretty much washed out by the rain. Still——"

"Wasn't—er—the cage locked, however?" Dr. Todd interrupted nervously. "I mean to say——"

"The keys", Guthrie rasped, "hung there, in the menagerie! Whoever wheeled out the cage could have got 'em easy! The main point is *why*——"

But he did not finish. Heavy steps in the hall made him jerk his head around. In a second Dr. Pemberton strode into the room—big, breathless, very earnest. He was daubing a handkerchief at his perspiring neck.

"Sergeant," he announced curtly, "I think you'll find Sabatéo well enough to be questioned!"

At that report Charlie snapped his body erect, eagerly. His eyes flashed. He turned towards the door.

"Queer thing about the fellow," sharply added the police surgeon; "when I told him what had happened to poor McKane he all but screamed. Then he started jabbering wildly for the police. I think you'll find he has something pretty important to tell about this business!"

There was a general surge towards the hall. It seemed they were all about to race for Milo's bedside. But Dr. Pemberton threw up protesting, almost angry hands.

"Here!" he cried. "Hold on! I can't let you all rush in on the man! Just one or two Sergeant! The less excitement he has, the more coherent he'll be, anyhow."

"Why, even when I stepped out he was prattling crazily

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about 'oro' or 'doro'. . . . That means gold in Spanish, doesn't it?"

Gold?

Distinctly Charlie Codwell heard a gasp behind him. He swung around. Harvey Anderson's face, he saw, had gone shockingly white. The man's shaking fingers were clutching the back of a chair fiercely, desperately, like—like talons.

Why?—Charlie asked himself. . . .

Five minutes later, in a servant's small bedchamber behind the kitchen——

"No, no, *señor*, I—I cannot tell you who—who hit me," weakly whispered Milo Sabatéo. He lay limp on his bed, eyes closed painfully. "I do not know."

"Great Scott, man!" exclaimed Guthrie. "Do you mean to say you didn't *see* him?"

"No-o."

"How's that? How did it happen?"

Milo raised weary lids. Having been in Jordan McKane's employ nine years, he spoke very creditable English. Yet now he seemed to have a hard task in finding words.

"I was near the—the door in the menagerie," he forced out huskily, slowly. "It was open. Somebody came in behind me. I heard him, *si*. But he—he struck me down before I could—look around. And everything became black. . . ."

The Brazilian drew a shaky breath. "When I came to, the big doors were open. The condor's cage was out. I could hear it rolling outside.

"I tried to run after him, but, *Deus*, I was blind with pain! I fell in the mud. Then he came running in the darkness. I tried to raise my head, but he—he hit me again. That was all——"

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"And you never saw his face!" Guthrie groaned in dismay. "What luck, what rotten luck!"

"Oh, it does not matter now," Milo moaned hopelessly. "If the *Señor* McKane is d-dead, nothing matters. He was a great gentleman, a fine gentleman——"

"Why should anybody have wanted to kill him?"

Surprisingly, Milo grated: "It was for the gold! *Si*, for the gold! I said to him myself that it would bring—trouble! I—I *knew* it!"

The four people gathered round the bed gaped at him in wonder that was half amazement. Besides the police sergeant and the doctor, both Claire McKane and Charlie Codwell had entered. Clair because she had an undeniable right to explore the mystery of her father's death; and Charlie because he had walked into the room determinedly, without asking questions.

They all watched Sabatéo intently. His lean, brown-skinned face was haggard, and he seemed to struggle to keep his eyes open. Yet he insisted on speaking. And perhaps it was well, for speech restored some of his strength.

"The gold", he said thickly, "came with us from Brazil. It was s-smuggled out of the country. But the *Señor* McKane and I did not know about it! I swear it! *Pel' amor de Deus*, we did not know!"

Claire McKane, her features pallid, whispered anxiously "Milo! What—what on earth are you talking about? What is this? Who smuggled?"

"Listen, *señorita*! When your father was hunting in Brazil with the *Señor* Anderson, we came one day to an Indian village in the jungles of the Parapiti. But there were no Indians. No, no. Only huts and the broken walls of a temple——"

The injured Brazilian went on and on, hypnotically, des-

pite his broken voice, weaving a report that threw those about him into an awed spell.

Charlie, as he listened, found himself clinging hard to the foot of the bed. His eyes burned, and his mind constructed new theories to fit Milo's revelations.

McKane's expedition, he learned, had spent only two days in the deserted Indian village in Parapiti. Jordan McKane, more deeply interested in wild life than in anthropology, had found nothing of sufficient importance in the ruined settlement to warrant a long delay. So they had pressed on, scarcely thinking of the village again.

Until two weeks ago—two short weeks ago—here in Pleyton. . . .

Milo suddenly opened his eyes wide and they were blazing. In spite of the doctor's protests, he propped himself up on one elbow, and his bandaged head was held high.

On an evening two weeks ago, he said, he and *Señor* McKane had returned from a round of the estate to see an unexpected light in the menagerie. Puzzled, they had hurried to peer into the window nearest that lamp; and there they had discovered—Harvey Anderson.

He was on his knees, working with a hammer and a large screwdriver; working rapidly; prising apart the two layers of floorboards in a wooden cage. It was the sort of cage used in travelling only; it had served to bring one of the animals over from Brazil.

Startled, yet not alarmed—for there was no reason to distrust Anderson—they had watched a moment in wonder. They had seen him separate the upper level of boards from the lower. Then, from between the two, he drew four yellow discs. Yellow? Ah, no, *gold! Si, gold!* . . .

Those discs were flat, as big as dinner plates. Every one

of them glittered in a strange way, as if it were studded with a hundred pin-points of flashing light. McKane, though amazed, had not immediately realized what the things were. But as for Milo Sabatéó——

“I *knew*!” he cried hoarsely, excitement bringing strength to his voice. He glared from the three men to Claire McKane. The girl stood speechless, one hand at her throat. It was as if she foresaw a new blow. . . .

“My people were Indians!” Milo forced out in tense, hoarse vehemence. “They have told me many things! Those discs were gold, *señores*, gold brought from the hills of the Andes!

“And do you know what shone in them like that? You may stare but, *pel’ Deus*, I tell the truth! You will see! The things that shone were diamonds of Brazil! *Si*, Brazilian diamonds—hundreds of them inlaid in designs in each disc!

“The Indians called such a disc the *mazurata*—‘the eye of the Sun God’. . . . The *mazurata* is put on top of the temple, so it will catch all the light of the sun, and—and shine brighter than stars or moon!

“To you English, *señores*, such *mazuratas* are worth fortunes. *Si*, fortunes! More than a hundred diamonds set in heavy gold—and *Señor* Anderson had four like that! *Four! . . .*”

Milo Sabatéó fell back on his pillow, trembling. While he gasped for breath, there was silence in the room. A choking hush all the more intense because of the savage thrash of rain on the window.

Charlie Codwell, listening to this fantastic background of crime, became infected with Milo’s excitement. It throbbed within him. It enfevered his mind.

His thoughts strained to connect the astonishing *mazu-*

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ratas with the death of Jordan McKane. Yet he did not speak.

"Where", Sergeant Guthrie at last ejaculated, "did Anderson get the things?"

"In—in the Parapiti village," whispered Milo, breathless. "He found them in the broken walls of the temple. But he did not tell us of them in Brazil. Oh, no! He wanted to keep the *mazuratas* for himself. So he hid them in his extra clothes.

"And many weeks later, when we came to Manaus, he put them between the floorboards of the cage. That was how he smuggled them out of the country. But he had no opportunity to take them until that night, two weeks ago, when he tried to get them in the menagerie——"

"Oh!" The gasp, low and agonized, broke from Claire McKane. Her hands suddenly covered her face, and she swung away from the bed. Charlie, gaping at the girl in consternation, knew she was sobbing. And he felt wretched himself.

In one night, he realized, she had seen her father dead and her fiancé accused of smuggling. He scarcely knew what to say to her. What *could* one say?

Guthrie, however, proved more callous to the girl's misery. He was already demanding:

"Sabatéo, how do you know all this?"

Milo's explanation, though halting, was impressively vivid. On that night two weeks ago he and McKane had rushed into the menagerie to confront Anderson with the golden discs.

The blond man had sprung back like one trapped. At first he had attempted to bluster some lies, but they had sounded so futile and ridiculous that he had collapsed and confessed the truth.

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Jordan McKane had stared. On him the situation exercised a chaotic effect. The idea of smuggling being connected with his expedition outraged him. He had rasped: "And you're the man I'm supposed to regard as my future son-in-law!"

(At that Charlie heard another stifled sob in Claire McKane's throat. Impulsively he caught her arm, squeezed it with a kind of reassurance, though his eyes remained on Milo.)

McKane—the Brazilian continued—had been baffled. What was to be done with the golden discs? Dispose of them? No. He realized they could be neither sold nor given away without betraying the fact that his expedition had smuggled them out of Brazil—thus ruining a reputation he had given a lifetime to build.

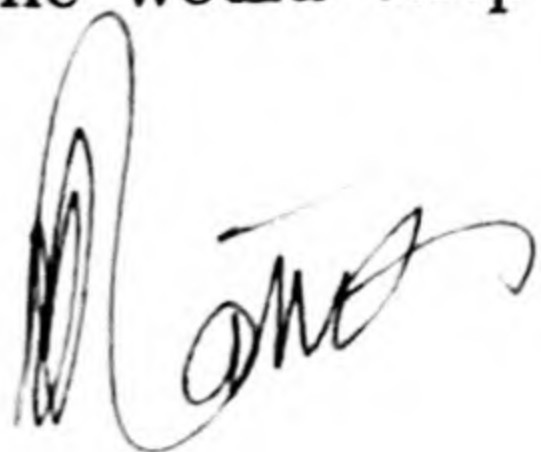
Keep the things? No—there Harvey Anderson vehemently objected. They belonged, after all, to him. Anderson insisted on dislodging the diamonds and selling them individually.

He offered to share the money, but such a plan McKane discarded with a snarl; he wanted none of it.

"However you try to dispose of these things," he had warned bitterly, "they're bound to cause questions. And questions will bring out the truth. They'll ruin both of us!"

In the end they had compromised on a postponement of action until the matter could be considered calmly. The *mazuratas* had been taken into the house, though where they had been placed Milo could not say. And yesterday, after two weeks of nervous indecision, McKane had made a resolution.

"He—he came into the menagerie," whispered Milo Sabatéo. "He told *Señor* Anderson he would telephone



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for a London lawyer—a friend he could trust—and he would tell the lawyer everything and ask his advice. He said——”

But that was as far as the Brazilian could go. As far as he would ever go. . . .

What happened at that instant was nightmarish. For sheer horror it became the most appalling moment of the night. It caught them all utterly unprepared, dazed.

There was a single sharp crack.

A shot! It came from outside the window, and the pane burst into a hundred flying fragments that clattered on the floor.

Even while the glass tinkled, Milo Sabatéo screamed. His body heaved up crazily, turned, and collapsed. Once he writhed and gasped, “*Deus!*” Then he lay limp—with blood streaming from a black bullet hole in his heart. . . .

Charlie Codwell, his whole being ablaze with horror, scarcely realized what he did. He sprang to the shattered window, jerked up the pane. Glaring out into the down-pour, he had the merest glimpse of a black figure—hardly more than a shadow—vanishing under the trees.

He shouted hoarsely to the sergeant. Then he was outside, plunging through mud and rain and darkness in pursuit of that killer.

He ran desperately. His breaths exploded in his chest. His eyes flamed. Somehow he forgot that he was unarmed, that he was chasing a man with a gun—one who had already shown utter ruthlessness.

It did not matter now. The only thought pounding in his mind was a mad determination to seize that fugitive!

He lunged among the trees, banging against them. For perhaps twenty yards he raced on blindly—only to halt, panting in dismay.

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He could see no one here! The darkness was almost impenetrable. In frantic tension he listened for running steps to guide him. But the rain thrashed so violently that it overwhelmed all other sounds.

Charlie stood groaning with all the vehemence of an outraged, baffled soul.

Why Milo Sabatéó had been shot to death he could not pause to consider now. He wanted to act, to dash after the murderer, to do *something*! But which way was he to turn in this Stygian maze? His clenched fists shook in an agony of frustration.

When Sergeant Guthrie reached him, there was still no sound. They stood glaring among the trees. Their faces were colourless masks, and neither uttered a word—until suddenly, somewhere at their right, they *did* hear the slosh of racing feet!

“Come on!” blurted Guthrie.

With the suddenness of startled rabbits they darted off. They ran hard, drawing nearer and nearer the sounds—and almost crashed into the charging figure of Harvey Anderson!

“What’s happened?” Anderson gasped.

Guthrie flung back, “What are *you* doing here?”

“I—I heard a shot! I came out to see——”

The big man looked so dumbstruck, so shaken, that it was almost impossible to doubt him. Yet Charlie did doubt what he said. He could not help it, after the story he had heard from Milo Sabatéó.

But he crushed all questions now, though a score of them surged to his lips. He whirled around, listened again—and heard no other steps. . . .

Within a few moments they were joined by the sergeant’s two uniformed men. Guthrie became grim,

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decisive. He ordered an immediate search of the grounds.

But it proved futile.

Fifteen minutes later, when they all returned, drenched, to meet on the porch of the house, their defeated faces told a story of hopeless failure. Sabatéo's murderer had vanished. Completely. Sergeant Guthrie, shaking the rain from his clothes, rasped:

"I can't figure this out! Why was Milo killed anyhow? He'd already told us what he knew about the—the golden discs. It would be different if he hadn't yet spoken; then maybe I could *understand* his being silenced!"

With the last phrase he glared significantly at Harvey Anderson. And the big man caught his breath as if a weapon had been jammed against his chest. He stood there, in the darkness of the porch, rigid and colourless.

His light hair was soaked and disarrayed. He darted quick glances from the sergeant to Charlie Codwell: then at the two policemen, as though measuring his chances to leap away from this group. . . .

"Well?" Guthrie demanded harshly. "Haven't you got *anything* to say about it, Mr. Anderson?"

"To say?" The words came softly, as if he were struggling to suppress his voice. He spoke with a tremor. "What *can* I say? It seems Milo has already told you everything."

"You bet he did!"—furiously.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Anderson asked after a tense pause. "Arrest me for smuggling?"

"No, not for *smuggling*!" Guthrie said with quivering menace in every syllable. "Not for smuggling, Mr. Anderson."

And then Charlie spoke. His voice came like a shock because of its very quietness. "Let me remind you", he said to the blond man, "that you're quite safe on the smug-

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gling charge. The only two witnesses who could have testified against you are dead."

Anderson swung upon him wrathfully.

"Thanks for the reassurance!" he grated. "I suppose that's your delicate way of saying I killed them—just to protect myself in case of arrest!"

"I had considered the point," Charlie granted; "yes".

"Well, I *didn't* kill them! Understand? I didn't! I don't know any more about this damned business than you do!"

"You have no idea of why either Jordan McKane or Milo Sabatéo was murdered?"

"No!"

"No idea as to why the condor was freed in the house?"

"No! If I knew, I'd tell you——"

The last words were all but jolted out of Harvey Anderson's mouth, for the porch door, suddenly opening, struck his back and threw him off balance. He turned angrily to glare at the thin, timorous figure on the threshold—Dr. William Todd.

The scientist was gaping about in apprehension, one hand at his lips, his eyes grotesquely magnified by the glasses. He looked from face to face, finally letting a disappointed gaze fall on Sergeant Guthrie.

"So you—er—didn't catch him!" he whispered wretchedly. "Good heavens, that's frightful, Sergeant, frightful!"

Half-an-hour later Guthrie was constrained to hold a second *post-mortem* inquiry in the drawing-room; this time, however, without Claire McKane. The girl was in her own chamber upstairs, attended by Sarah and Dr. Pemberton, and fighting against hysteria. As Charlie had feared, her endurance had attained the breaking point. Seeing Milo murdered had been the last straw.

Charlie himself now stood beside a window in the draw-

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ing-room, intently watching both Harvey Anderson and Dr. Todd.

As a lawyer, he could have conducted an efficient interrogation of his own; one perhaps more thorough than Guthrie's, since, under the guidance of Stacy Trent, he had developed a shrewd skill in cross-examination. But, though a hundred questions and suspicions crammed his mind, he preferred not to trespass on the police official's duty.

Guthrie began with Dr. Todd.

"We've got to find out", he declared harshly, "just where everybody was at the time the shot was fired. You, first, Doctor. How about it?"

"Why—er—" Dr. Todd, his face as yellow as his bald head, sat rapidly rubbing the arms of his chair. "I was right here, Sergeant! Right in this room all the time."

"Doing what?"

"Waiting for coffee."

"Wha-at?"

"Waiting for coffee!" the doctor emphatically maintained. "I had—er—felt the need of it, after all that had happened. I was positively shaken. So I asked Quincy if he couldn't get me a cup—hot and black."

The sergeant turned a frowning, unspoken question upon the old servant. Quincy hastily nodded his grey head.

"That's right, sir!" he assented. "Th—that's absolutely right."

"And where were *you*, Quincy?"

"I was in the kitchen with Sarah. She was making the coffee, and I was waiting to take it in to Doctor Todd. That's the truth, sir."

"Did you see or hear anybody outside the kitchen windows? Or *anywhere* outside?"

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"No, sir, I certainly didn't!"

Guthrie darted a glance back at Dr. Todd. "How about you? Hear anybody outside?"

"No—o, but I was at the front of the house, of course."

The sergeant sniffed loudly. Apparently he was disposed to accept these assertions without immediate challenge. Or else he was merely eager to swing his inquisition to Harvey Anderson.

Charlie could think of a dozen other questions he might have put to Dr. Todd and Quincy. Yet he was not sorry to see the official turn to the blond Viking. A new tension instantly seized the room.

"Well, Mr. Anderson," Guthrie began, "now let's have your side of it. Where were you when Sabatéo was shot?"

The big man, standing with his hands jammed in his pockets, said stiffly, "I don't remember exactly."

"Don't *remember!* . . . How the devil could you forget?"

"Because I wasn't anywhere in particular," said Anderson. "I was nervous, and I just kept—kept walking around from room to room."

"Nervous, eh? About what?"

At that Anderson smiled bitterly, even sardonically. "Don't you think there's plenty to be nervous about in this house?" he asked. "With a corpse in the library and—well, I won't deny it—with the *mazuratas* to think about."

"I see. So you just kept walking around and around like a mouse in a cage, eh?"

"Something like that, yes"—thickly.

"When you heard the shot, what happened?"

Anderson frowned resentfully. "You know what happened," he snapped. "I heard the screams from Milo's room, and ran to it. You and Mr. Codwell had just jumped

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out to hunt the killer; and I followed you. That's all about it."

"Did you see anybody outside?"

"Not a soul."

Sergeant Guthrie paused, sniffing. Uncertain of just how to proceed, he rubbed his chin, glanced uneasily at Charlie. And it was then that Charlie Codwell, lithe and grim, stepped away from the window. He was fingering a cigarette he had neglected to light. Now he tossed it into the fireplace.

"Mr. Anderson——" he began.

The big man whirled around angrily. "Do I have to answer *your* questions, too?"

"It would be wise," Charlie quietly assured him, but he paled a little at the other's tone. He wasn't accustomed to having men snarl at him like that. He said, "I want to talk about those *mazuratas*."

"What about them?"—bluntly.

"Do you know where Mr. McKane put the things?"

"Of course I do! Under the papers in the drawer of the library-desk. To be frank, I'd have got them out if you didn't have a policeman posted in the room."

Charlie nodded, looking obliquely at the sergeant. "I think we ought to get them," he suggested.

With Guthrie acquiescing, the whole tense group at once moved into the library. McKane's body now lay on a settee, under a white sheet. They passed it, with shudders, to reach the flat walnut desk. There the anticipation of seeing the amazing jungle treasure put a strain upon them all.

But when they searched the drawer—Anderson groping through it with sudden horror, even frenzy—they found the golden discs gone! . . . *stolen*.

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As the hours sped by that night, Charlie realized that he was letting the confusion of the house seep into his brain. His thoughts whirled dizzily. Even when at last he threw himself on his bed, at three o'clock in the morning, he could find no real composure.

He lay awake, half dressed; seeing again in the darkness above him the horribly mangled throat of Jordan McKane; seeing that last convulsive heave of Milo Sabatéo—hearing the Brazilian's terrible shriek. And sudden shivers ran through him.

Sometimes, too, he could hear Claire McKane's sobs in the next room. Whenever that happened, he frowned and tossed fitfully and felt unutterably wretched. But, always, when she fell silent, his thoughts reverted to the shocking mystery itself.

Who had committed these murders?

Who had stolen the diamond-studded gold discs?

Harvey Anderson had estimated their value at above £60,000! Could he himself, despite his protestations of innocence, have slain Jordan McKane in order to acquire sole possession of the treasures?

For it seemed that only he and Milo Sabatéo had shared McKane's knowledge of the *mazuratas*. Even Claire had been ignorant of their existence.

And what about Quincy? . . . Charlie scowled. Surely it was conceivable that the old servant had chanced upon those brilliant discs; or he might have overheard a discussion concerning them.

Still, they seemed to constitute a treasure too grand, too awesome, for one in Quincy's position. The man would have been afraid, Charlie suspected, to commit so monstrous a crime. And yet one could not be certain—

Dr. Todd?

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Charlie could not forget that the scientist had been planning to leave this house in the morning. As he visioned the timorous man, his face hardened. Oh, he had not neglected Dr. Todd!

At midnight, indeed, he had done an impulsive, perhaps a reprehensible thing. He had slipped up to the top floor to search the doctor's luggage. . . . The bags had not been locked, but they had yielded no *mazuratas*.

With these problems thudding in his head, Charlie Codwell scarcely slept that night. Towards dawn the rain stopped; and with its cessation the stillness became heavy, strained.

He rose impetuously and lit a cigarette. Frowning, he stood at his window, smoked, and glowered into the trees. As the grey light flowed into the wet scene, he could see the empty cage of the condor down there where Quincy had found it. The sight elicited a grim little grunt.

"One thing is certain," he promised himself. "I'm not going home till this thing is cleared up!"

He found himself rather bitterly wishing that Stacy Trent were here. Trent had a clear, logical brain quite capable of overcoming the confusion of others.

A sane discussion with his senior partner, Charlie believed, would assuredly clarify his own thoughts. Might even result in a perception of the mystery's solution! Well, he had sent a message to Trent. He had only to wait. . . .

Charlie waited until eleven o'clock that morning; and then his partner's blue car, spattered with mud, came whizzing up the gravelled driveway. He spied it from the the library window and promptly abandoned Dr. Todd to hasten outside.

As he saw Trent's tall, silver-haired figure emerge from the car, he felt, with inestimable relief, that a new stage

in the mystery—a more lucid phase of it, surely—had arrived. . . .

“Well, you *have* had quite a night,” Stacy Trent muttered when he had heard Charlie’s account of the affair. They were in the library, from which McKane’s body had already been removed. And Dr. Todd, apparently absorbed in staring through a window, stood behind them, listening.

“I didn’t find your message until this morning,” Trent explained. “Then I raced up. . . . Where’s Sergeant Guthrie?”

“Searching the grounds for footprints, I believe,” answered Charlie, keeping a puzzled eye on the scientist. “Not much hope, though,” he added. “The rain last night either obliterated or disfigured marks of that sort.”

Trent nodded agreement. “You’re probably right. Tell me, how’s Miss McKane bearing up?”

“Pretty much under the weather, I’m afraid,” Charlie mumbled dourly. “She’s up in her room.”

“In bed?”

“Oh, no. I’ve seen her twice to-day.”

“Then I’d better go up and pay my respects before we do anything else,” Trent decided, rising. “Later we can have a talk and a look around. Ask Quincy to show me up, will you?”

Charlie noticed as his partner followed Quincy up the stairs, that the man was taking this tragedy in his client’s home with profound anxiety. His face looked worn.

He must have travelled fast and steadily to reach Pleyton by eleven o’clock, and the strain was visible on him. His clothes, too, were disarrayed, badly in need of a brush. Yet he retained the look of competence, of self-possession which invariably heartened his junior partner,

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Trent spent more than half an hour with Claire McKane. He spoke not only as her father's solicitor but as a friend. And he learned, to his astonishment—when he asked about her plans for the future—that she had determined to break her engagement to young Harvey Anderson!

"I—I could never marry him now," she whispered in a deep, exhausted voice. "I'd always feel it was his—his smuggling of the gold discs that brought on all this horrible tragedy. I don't think father would have w—wanted me to marry him now. . . ."

Trent understood. He leaned forward and gently squeezed her hand. "You know best," he said. When at last he left the girl, he looked exceedingly grave.

"Where's Mr. Codwell?" he asked Quincy in the lower hall.

"I saw him near the menagerie, sir, just a few minutes ago. Shall I call him for you?"

"Never mind. I'll find him."

Stacy Trent went out into the grey sunless morning and thoughtfully circled the house to the menagerie. When he entered the concrete building he did not see Charlie. But the sight of the caged animals along the walls held him there in fascination.

He winced at the overwhelming smell of the place; but he could not help watching one of the jaguars roar for food. Even the monkeys set up a clamorous chatter.

Trent, grunting, was about to turn away when Charlie Codwell ran into the building.

A changed Charlie. . . .

He was pallid with excitement. His eyes were afire in a face hard as rock. Dishevelled hair hung over his forehead, and even his tie was askew. Breathless, he sent a swift searching glance along the length of the menagerie

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and seeing nobody there but Trent, he slammed the door shut.

"What on earth——!" The older man gaped at him in bewilderment. "Don't tell me something else has happened in this insane——"

"Something *has* happened!" Charlie panted hoarsely. "Something I couldn't have thought—possible! I—I want to talk to you about it alone. . . . Trent, I understand everything now!"

Stacy Trent's mouth opened. "Eh?"

"Everything! Even the condor's being in the house!"

"What in heaven's name——"

"Listen!" Charlie stood rigid, his back against the door. His tones sank to quivering tension.

"When the murderer killed McKane, his first impulse was to shield himself. That's nearly always the case. He saw the frightful wounds in McKane's neck; saw that they looked exactly like clawings. That gave him his crazy idea—that and the nearness of the menagerie.

"He overpowered Milo and freed the condor. Opened the cage against a window of the house, probably. In that way he prevented the bird from flying off into the night; forced him indoors.

"He hoped to make it seem that McKane had been killed by the condor! But the bird went upstairs instead of into the library, and nobody saw him until——"

"Good Lord, wait a minute!" Stacy Trent rapped out. "You're rushing along at fine speed, but what's it all about?"

Charlie sucked in a swift breath. His eyes flashed. "Trent," he whispered, "I know who killed McKane and Sabatéo!"

Trent gaped incredulously. And Charlie flung out:

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"*You!*"

"I—?"

A hush. . . . A dreadful moment, with Trent choking on his outcry, losing colour. He had to wrench his figure erect to maintain his poise.

"Are—are you crazy?" he finally forced out huskily.

"I wish to heaven I could think so!" Charlie groaned. "Trent, I—I feel rotten about this! It's hell. But what can I *do*? I've learned the truth!"

Trent's face was ghastly. He swayed slightly, choked on his words: "I don't—get you!"

"Look at your suit!"

"Wha—at?"

"Your suit. Look at it! Wrinkled, shapeless. Anybody can see it's had a drenching! If you'd come from London in your closed car, you'd be wearing one that was pressed. And it hasn't been raining here since dawn, so that you couldn't have been drenched like that on the way up from town."

Charlie drove desperate fingers back through his hair.

"When I saw your suit like that", he rushed on, "I couldn't help remembering that the killer last night was running around in the rain! *He* must have been soaked!

"Then it flashed on me, Trent. I realized McKane might have told you about the gold discs over the phone; that you might have been the one who came up here and stole them—sending me as a sort of blind!

"You could have driven up by car while I was coming by train. You'd have made better time, too, because I had to wait for connections."

"You're losing your head, man!" Trent cried harshly.

"Do—do you realize what you're *saying*?"

Charlie felt miserable. He hated to do this to Stacy Trent.

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But there was no choice. He had to gulp down his English before he could plunge on:

"Then—then I remembered you weren't at home last night when I phoned! But I prayed you'd got in—I give you my word, Trent, I actually prayed to be wrong! But I had to *know*! So, while you were talking to Claire McKane just now, I phoned your house again."

"What!" Trent all but screamed.

"Your housekeeper told me you hadn't been in all night. But she had a phone call from you at about midnight. That was when she gave you my message.

"When I heard that, Trent, I went hot and cold all over. I knew you'd been lying to me—you said you got my message only this morning.

"And suddenly I could see everything—why you killed Sabatéo, too! You feared that when you came here, to your client's home Milo might recognize you as the man who'd struck him down!"

Stacy Trent, his distinguished face as white as his collar, took two impulsive steps forward and seized Charlie's arms in a trembling grip.

"Charlie," he rasped hoarsely, "with—with theories like that you stand ready to accuse me of m—murder?"

"I haven't said anything yet to the police. I—couldn't. You don't know what hell I'm going through."

"It's all insane!"

But Charlie shook his head and pushed on heavily: "Look. I figured it out this way. You could have come up on the porch last night, seen McKane in the library through a window, and knocked at the pane. He'd have let you in himself, without Quincy's even knowing it.

"When he told you about the *mazuratas*, you must have asked to see them. And as he took them out of the drawer,

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you drove the fire-prongs into his throat—before he could so much as cry out.

“There was a revolver in the drawer—Claire McKane told me that this morning. It probably fell to the floor when you seized the gold discs and got out of the house. Then you thought of the condor trick——”

“You’re crazy!” wildly gasped Trent. “Absolutely *crazy*, I tell you!”

They glared into each other’s flaming eyes. Their breaths spurted into each other’s pallid faces. Even the beasts in the cages seemed hushed, watching in horror.

“At the beginning”, Charlie said huskily, “I thought myself I must be crazy to have such ideas about *you*. I had to convince myself one way or the other. So I—I wondered what you could have done with the discs, if you’d taken them.

“I knew you hadn’t gone to London. You’d probably been around here all night, in your car. That’s why, when I finished talking to the housekeeper, I searched the car.... Trent, under the back seat—under those tools and papers—I found the *mazuratas*!”

As he delivered this final coup, Charlie saw panic sweep into his partner. The man was trembling violently. He jerked terrified eyes from right to left; he seemed afraid even of the animals—of the very silence. Then, desperately he began to shake Charlie.

“For God’s sake!” he whispered. “All right, all right! Don’t spoil it!”

“Spoil what?”

“This chance! Those discs are worth a—a fortune! We can share it, Charlie! We can——”

“No!”

“Don’t be a fool!”

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"No, Trent! I can't! Nothing like that——"

"I tell you it's the chance of a lifetime, you idiot! They're ours! Nobody will ever know!"

"You don't understand—I couldn't——" And then, suddenly, the menagerie door opened . . . opened before Sergeant Guthrie. . . .

He began, "Oh, there you are! I've been hunting——"

But he stopped in amazement. For at his appearance an odd thing had happened. Stacy Trent, as if caught in a guilty act, released his partner and stumbled back four steps to crash against the bars of a cage. He stood there colourless, gulping, staring at the police officer in a kind of trance.

"What the devil——?" blankly exclaimed Guthrie. "What——"

But before he could finish, Charlie Codwell, with a wild, horrified cry, leaped across the menagerie. He roared, "Look out, Trent! *Look out!*"

The building echoed his shout. The animals heard it and responded with a deafening cacophony of howls and squeals and snarls. All too late to warn Stacy Trent.

A brown, hairy leg—the foreleg of a jaguar—came through the bars of the cage behind him! A huge paw with claws like nails encircled his throat, dragged him back against the bars!

He shrieked.

Charlie reached him in a frenzy. He seized the jaguar's leg in an insane grip, tugged at it with all the power of his body. The beast itself must have been shocked by the sudden clamour, for it released the man and ran to the back of its cage.

But as it withdrew its paw, those terrible claws ripped across the front of Stacy Trent's throat!

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The man dropped to the floor and writhed as convulsively as a dying snake. Charlie, falling to his knee beside him, all but fainted.

"Trent!" he gasped. "For God's sake, Trent——!"

He saw a frightful demoniac grin contort Stacy Trent's lips. The man rasped out against the floor:

"All right—Charlie! It—it was coming—to me! I was—a fool!"

Those were his last words. ~~When the~~ ~~man~~ ~~was~~ ~~dead~~

~~I wanted to be~~ ~~with~~ ~~you~~ ~~very much~~
~~when you were~~ ~~in the hospital~~
~~and I was~~ ~~in the hospital~~ ~~with you~~
~~and I was~~ ~~in the hospital~~ ~~with you~~
~~and I was~~ ~~in the hospital~~ ~~with you~~
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~~and I was~~ ~~in the hospital~~ ~~with you~~
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~~and I was~~ ~~in the hospital~~ ~~with you~~

Please help
the mother
of the child
who is
in the
hospital
and
the
child
who is
in the
hospital
and
the
child
who is
in the
hospital

BY
WILL SCOTT



THE WEEK THAT HAPPENED TWICE

Of all the strange corners of London in many ways the strangest is that remote corner past which the dead leaves of other summers seem not to care to blow, that gently sad and tilted corner called Chalk Farm. There is an atmosphere about the place, some sombre tone or colour, a kind of topographical melancholy, a difference from other places which turns the gayest mind to thought. I called it "the hill without a weekday", and it seemed a proud phrase to me then. Once Chalk Farm crept into a comic song, or a serio-comic song, as they used to call them; and Gertie Millar sang it. "Chalk Farm to Camberwell Green, All on a Summer's Day". But imagine a comic song about Chalk Farm! How could it expect to know fame?

"The hill without a weekday" I called it. For seven days in the week there is a Sabbath calm, though not perhaps a religious calm, or even a churchly calm, in its streets. A long stillness that has perspectives. This may strike you as a novel thought, but to me it is just the last tremblings of an echo. I have said the same a hundred times to old John Wicket—talked about the weekdaylessness of Chalk Farm, a long time ago; and out of the notion

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came the grimmest joke that ever I played. Afterwards I modified my views. I came to know a time when in tilted Chalk Farm there were six weekdays too many, and a Sunday to spare.

It was back in my early London days, 'prentice days, times when a sixpence must buy a shillingsworth; and to my practised eye the shop of old Wicket in Chalk Farm had the look of a place that would not charge too much. It was a bookshop in the main, cheap and second-hand, with a mess of general ware thrown in, literally; rubber spouts for broken teapots, an old oak chest, gas-mantles, umbrellas, a twelve-guinea magic lantern without lens and slides. The shop was up the hill there, where one half of the places seem to cling in desperation to the hillsides, perpetually perspiring in the effort not to drop back into Camden Town; while the others have gotten themselves on to a kind of shelf, behind an iron rail, where they sit panting after the strain, a little hopeless of any further ascent. Old John had a card in his window: "Room". I went in.

"Ah, yes," he said. "I am asking eight shillings for the room. It is at the back of the house . . ." and he broke off on this doubtful note, as if wishing to be perfectly fair to me. He was the most doubtful little man I have ever met. He always wore a bowler hat indoors, and never a jacket. He used to like to stroke his shirt-sleeves. And his face was decorated with a fringe of hair that almost turned him into an ancestor of the little fellow on the comic strip. I never could remember which was which. If I don't mean Mutt I mean Jeff.

I noticed that he laid the newspaper he had been reading on top of a tremendous pile of newspapers in the corner of the room, before he rose to lead me upstairs, three flights, and display his offer. To a 'prentice of the arts, new

THE WEEK THAT HAPPENED TWICE to town, this had the appearance of a very satisfactory room at a very satisfactory price, and I said I would take it at the eight shillings. There were trees outside the window, and old John explained that before they built the houses over there you could see the spire of Highgate church. His tones implied that I had loitered.

"Of course it's the back of the house," he said, when I had clinched the deal. "You've got a climb. . . ." He went to the window, caressing his sleeves, and looked out. "I tell you what," he said—"six shillings." After which we went back downstairs and he climbed into the window to take out the card with "Room" on it. But with his fingers touching he hesitated and stroked his mouth.

"You're pretty sure not to stay," he decided; and he left the card where it was.

But I stayed with him for close on a year, eleven queer, unusual months, with the evenings all spent back of the shop, behind a screen, listening to old John talking. He had some things to tell of, too. He had been all over the world, or he said he had. Over his fireplace was a photograph, pretty dog-eared, of Regina, in 1899. It was one of his treasures. And he had a trick of sighing for Central Park and Riverside Drive before he died.

One night when I came down for my customary sit and gossip I found him reading the newspaper, but when he saw me he took off his glasses and laid the paper on the top of the pile in the corner. This time I asked him why he did it.

"When I get a hundredweight I sell them," he explained. "If I didn't watch little points like that I should never live. Until I get the hundredweight complete that pile is like a reference library. You can go back six months. It's interesting. . . ."

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When I had been with him for just on a month, one night the shop door opened and somebody came in. The date was the fifth of October.

How do I remember that so clearly? Well. . . .

We were surprised to have a caller, customer or whatever he might be, so late at night, for it was after ten o'clock. He came in, closing the door behind him, walked down the shop and stared at us round the screen. There was no light in the shop at this hour; only the warm glow of the fire was on his face; and it was like holding a match to an iceberg. It would not have been surprising if the fire had suddenly gone out. He had a long face, with sunken cheeks and parted lips and hiding eyes, and he was inside his overcoat as other men may be inside a house. I was, if you can understand what I mean, repelled by the man without actually disliking him.

"My name is Dingle," he announced in a breathy voice. "I am an author. I have had a nervous breakdown. I must have a room that is perfectly quiet. No interruption. You have a card in the window."

This crowded speech startled old Wicket to such an extent that he very nearly took his hat off. He stood hurriedly, stroking his sleeves and staring. "Ah, yes," he said; "yes. That room is let. . . . But perhaps I could manage another. Come along upstairs."

They went out and left me alone by the fire, thinking about the face of Dingle. Both the face and the whole bearing of the man fed thought. In some way he had kinship with the dead leaves against the walls outside, the weekdaylessness of this odd corner; and the aptness of the encounter here in Chalk Farm was startling. He was so impossible of being in a boat at Maidenhead, for example, or on the Brighton front. The man Dingle and Chalk

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Farm, together, were right. And I tingled with the thought
that the gods are artistic.

By and by Mr. Wicket came downstairs, hurrying for the
first and last time that I ever knew. His eyes were asking
questions of the Universe; and as a concession to conven-
tion his bowler was now tilted on the back of his head,
pushed back in some excess of emotion.

"There is a most extraordinary man!" he whispered, as
he sat nervously in his chair, but only on the edge of it. "A
most peculiar person! When I showed him the room he just
said 'all right' and stood waiting for me to go. And do you
know what he did, as soon as I was outside the door and
had closed it? He locked it! And then he went across to the
window and slipped the catch. That was a funny thing to
do! I thought 'That's funny!' and I knocked on the door,
meaning to ask if he could do with a bit of supper—just as
an excuse, you see. He never answered. He never made a
sound. I don't think I like him. He's absolutely silent there.
Do you think he's all right? Do you think he's *dead*? I don't
know what to do. . . .

"Do you think we ought to break the door in?" he asked
after a pause. "It's a most extraordinary position. Did you
see his face? I wish he hadn't come here. . . ."

I tried to reassure the little man. There was nothing
wrong, I said, and a man can't help his face. This Dingle
had had a nervous breakdown. He was a writer, and there-
fore not to be expected to conduct himself like an ordinary
boarder. Everything would be all right, I said.

"Yes," said Mr. Wicket. "I suppose you're right. I hope
you're right. I wish he hadn't come here, though."

He peeped round the screen into the dark shop, and at
the prompting of a whimsical afterthought got up suddenly
and went and climbed into the unlighted window. When

"Are you, 420 or 1. God I don't know
that you ^{have} got this job."

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he was back again behind the screen he had in his hand the card with the word "Room" printed on it.

"H'm!" he said.

He dropped the card in a drawer and closed it slowly.

To convey to you an adequate impression of the atmosphere in which we lived for the next several days is beyond my power. Words are poor pictures. We were obsessed. Literally we were overpowered by an unformed thought; obsessed by the presence of the man in the room above. Even the phrase is dramatic: The Man in the Room Above. It began to prey on old Wicket's mind.

"I don't think I like him," he would say. "Do you think he's all right? I wish *he'd* never come here. . . ."

"But the man does no harm," I would point out. "He's peaceable enough—keeps himself to himself. Does he pay all right?"

"I suppose I've nothing actually to grumble about. He's a model lodger, I suppose. I don't know. . . . I think I let him worry me too much. Yes, he pays up all right. But it's such a strange thing for a man to stay indoors day after day and never go out at all, never trouble about what's happening in the world. It isn't natural. He'll be forgetting what day it is if he stays up there much longer."

"I have always said," said I, "that this queer old neighbourhood is the very place in all the world where a man *can* forget what day it is. How can he keep a hold on life here? Nothing happens. Every day is like a Sunday. Natural weekday things don't come off, somehow. I could easily forget the day myself, without being shut in a room all the time. It would be a lark, wouldn't it, if he *did* forget? Such things are possible, eh?"

"I wish he'd go away," Wicket repeated monotonously. "I don't feel easy with him in the place."

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I used to hear about Dingle from old John, without actually seeing him myself. On the morning after his arrival the old fellow had gone upstairs early, fully expecting to find a corpse, I am convinced. But Dingle was quite alive. He explained, with a brilliant lack of modesty, that he was writing a masterpiece and must on no account be disturbed; but he would like meals brought up to his room three times a day. There was nothing very gruesome about this, if odd; and old Wicket did not see how he could reasonably complain. But he would bring downstairs the wildest tales about his lodger's eyes, and the way he peeped round the door of his room and seemed afraid the old man would enter. Wicket's idea was that the fellow was mad, and having once admitted him and got him settled in the upper room the position was pretty hopeless. He would sigh that the only way to separate himself from his boarder would be for him to die first.

"Tell him you want the room for somebody else?" I suggested.

"I don't know . . ." old Wicket hesitated. "*Dare you?* I don't think I will. P'raps he'll leave."

And so the days went by, seven or eight Sundays all together, and I never had a glimpse of Dingle. The nightly fireside gossip was all changed now. Mr. Wicket's mind forsook Central Park. He would talk of nothing but the man in the room above, and this was in the nature of a great feat when you take into account how little there was to talk about. A week of Sundays, all overshadowed by this Dingle; and then one evening old John Wicket had to go out to some club or society which he attended quarterly.

"You'll be all right?" he said. "You can go out if you like, but I wish you would stay in. . . . It's that fellow upstairs, I don't like leaving him alone in the house. It might

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be gone when I come back. I've always locked up the place before: then, I didn't have lodgers. But I can't ask him to go out for the evening, can I? He wouldn't go. I tell you what—sit with the door open; then if anything happens you can dash out."

"I'll be all right," said I. "He's no more likely to come down to-night than any other night."

"I don't like leaving you," he grumbled; but time was short for his meeting and he had to go away then.

I piled up the fire and drew the screen round and settled down to as cosy an evening as the odd atmosphere would permit. Of course it was impossible to think of anything but Dingle. I began to wonder if this were melodrama indeed that we were in. Had the man in the room above got away with somebody's jewels? Or perhaps he was an escaped criminal? And at this my eyes turned to the pile of newspapers which old Wicket was saving up to sell, and I took a layer from the top and systematically began to go through them. But there was nothing; no hint of crime of any magnitude during the last fortnight or so. I gave it up and sat staring into the fire, thinking anyhow, the last newspaper spread across my knees.

Some time afterwards I heard with a not too-pleasant sensation the sound of an opening door high above in the house. I knew that besides myself and Dingle there was nobody in the place. Dingle must be coming downstairs. And then I heard the slur of slippered feet. I sat up and looked along the dark shop. I had not acted on the old man's advice and left the door open; but across the road two men talked beneath a gas-lamp, and I was thankful for it. I sat back and waited. Slur—slur—slip. . . . After the talk that had passed between old Wicket and myself it was certainly an uncanny sound. Dingle was coming down-

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stairs! The Man had Come Out of the Room Above!

It was in thus waiting that the joke occurred to me. I recalled our talk of Dingle's forgetting what day it was, and the paper on my knee helped, and the photograph of Regina in 1899 turned my thoughts to America. It reminded me of my uncle in Chicago and a book he had once sent to me.

That is well over twenty years ago. I was a very small boy then and I had never seen this Chicago uncle. But he knew of me and he sent me this book—not, I hope, as a teacher and example. It was called *Peck's Bad Boy*, and I saw the thing done on the films a short time ago, stripped of its glamour. To my boyish imagination the pranks of young Peck were a glorious crescendo without climax. There was one in which he humbled to the dust his father, a very pillar of respectability in their village. The old man in an illness had turned his back on all common things of the world, such as newspapers and dates, and when by and by he got better, and on one Wednesday called for the paper, young Peck presented him with the issue for Tuesday. On Thursday he received the issue for Wednesday, and so on, right through the week. On Sunday, thinking it Saturday, the old man was of the opinion that he was well enough to do a little work in his garden; wherefore he donned his worst clothes, took his spade and set to work on his spring cabbages. After a while a long procession of churchgoers began to pass, all in their Sunday best, and the spectacle of one of their most respected sidesmen *working* on the Sabbath provoked a volcano of scandal such as had never been heard there before and ended by driving young Peck to cover in the woodshed.

All this came gleefully back to me from boyhood as I sat in that gloomy room at Chalk Farm, listening to the

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unpleasant slur of the footsteps of the man from the room above. Suddenly I acted on an impulse of impishness. I glanced at the date of the newspaper on my knee, and I hurriedly twirled the roller of an everlasting calendar that old Wicket kept on his mantelshelf. It took me but a moment. Then I sat back and waited.

I don't know what I expected to see when the door at the bottom of the staircase opened and Dingle came out. Wicket and I had so stressed even the most trifling details about the man in the room above that he had grown into a legend with me. I had, then, almost a pleasant surprise on seeing that actually Dingle was—only Dingle. Just a man; a pallid, strange-eyed, rather mysterious man, looking none the better for his week within walls; but only a man, nevertheless. He came behind the screen and stared at me.

"Where is the man?" he asked in his extraordinary hollow voice. "I want him. The man. There are no candles in my room. I told him about them. He has forgotten."

I did not care to tell him that Wicket was out and would not be back until late. As luck would have it a packet of candles was on the shelf in this back place, and I offered him one and he thanked me.

"Would you care to see the paper?" I invited, holding it out, the one of a fortnight before.

"Oh," he said dully. "All right." And he took it and went away.

I considered it rather a fine joke. I was looking forward to old Wicket's return, so that I could tell him all about it, and for ten minutes I gave myself up to anticipatory joy at the thought of his face when he heard, and the ultimate outcome of the joke. Ten minutes; and then, just as I was stooping over the fire to put fresh coal on, there came a

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startled shout from high up and I heard the sound of running feet. I nearly fell in the fire. Before I could make up my mind what to do the door burst open again and Dingle was there, suddenly still, really an awful thing to look at. He looked the most surprised man on earth. I nearly wanted to laugh. Not quite.

"What's the day?" he demanded abruptly.

"Tuesday," said I promptly.

"Date?"

"The twenty-ninth."

"The—the twenty-ninth?" He glanced at the paper in his hand. "Of September?"

I pointed to the calendar.

"But——" said Dingle. "But——"

He looked away from the calendar, looked at me, and as I live I never want to experience again the feeling I knew while his eyes held mine. I shall never know how long he stared at me; it seemed a day; but now I know that in that time I saw a man go mad. He was questioning, questioning, questioning with his terrible eyes; but he was not calling me liar. That might have broken the horror by provoking a quarrel. No; he was slowly and reluctantly *believing me*, and because of this, in some subtle way that I could not understand the moment was rigid not with danger but with fear, with horror. There was suddenly something ghastly about everything. Then he turned to the door again, and I saw that his hand was shaking.

"Oh, my God!" he muttered. And he staggered out, closing the door very gently.

When old Wicket returned he found me lost in a very maze of sensations and impressions and thoughts. I told him what I had done. A sterner man might have been angry, but poor little Wicket fought all his life on every-

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body's side, as nearly as he could, and his attitude to me was simply one of questioning perplexity.

"I don't think you should have done it," he said. "I don't understand why he should go on like that, but I do think you should not have interfered. However, it's done. Let us hope for the best. I think he's mad. I wish he would go out for a walk and forget where he lives. I do indeed. I'm going to bed. It's not nice to be awake."

And so we went to bed.

On the next morning we were made aware of a fresh disturbing attitude in the room above. When old Wicket came downstairs after taking up Dingle's breakfast he told me that the lodger had asked for the newspaper.

"What are we to do?" he sighed. "I daren't tell him you played a joke on him. He's not a man you can explain a joke to. I don't know what to do. I do wish you hadn't done it. I can't think what good it did you."

"There's only one thing to do," said I, plucking a paper for the thirtieth of September from the pile. "Give him this."

The poor old fellow stroked his shirt sleeves and sighed again.

"Or tell him the truth," said I. "It's one or the other."

At which he took the paper without a word and went upstairs.

Up to now an atmosphere merely mysterious had overhung the house. Now it was one of horror. I cannot say in what way. Except for the daily request for his newspaper Dingle did not perceptibly change at first. But old Wicket brought down the most alarming stories about the man's eyes and the way his hands shook. The little fellow was clean scared to death, and I am convinced that he would immediately have gone for the police, had he had anything

THE WEEK THAT HAPPENED TWICE to go to the police about. As it was, what could he tell them? The days went by, and John Wicket's listlessness and fear increased. The old man simply could not be persuaded to even look after his own interests. He would sit over the fire moaning "I want him out of the place. I want him out of the place. I can't think what he was about to come here. I didn't want him"; and such few customers as dribbled half-heartedly into the shop were attended to by myself. Thus dawdled things to a climax.

On the night of the fourteenth of October, or, as Dingle believed, the third, this tranquillity of fear was disturbed by an unexpected development. About half-past six in the evening Dingle came downstairs with hat and overcoat, and said that he was going out. A wild ray of hope shone in old Wicket's eye; but it vanished immediately when the lodger announced his return within an hour or two. Then Dingle hurried out of the shop for the first time in close on a fortnight, and I looked at Wicket.

"I'm after him," said I; and went without argument.

But at first Dingle got no farther than the tavern up the street, and my lot was a chilly vigil at the window while he consumed glass after glass of whisky. Plainly he was screwing up his courage for some unattractive enterprise; never have I seen a man drink so much at one time, and I marvelled that he remained sober, if sober he was. At all events, he could walk straight enough when at length we set out. He climbed the hill into Hampstead and made his way across the dark and now gloomy Heath in the direction of the pretty lanes on the wooded slope under Highgate. I shall never forget the weird glow of London's million lights shining upon us from the hole below.

Dingle stopped at last in a dark lane outside a house lost in black trees. The stables of another place had a lamp

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above the gate, giving just light enough for me to see by. The house was old and ivy-covered, with a dove-cote on a lawn. In the darkness I thought it rather repellent, it was so quiet and hidden and lightless. By carefully creeping behind the trees which lined the lane I could get near enough to see Dingle's face clearly in the lamplight, and I hope I may never again see a face holding so much of the most repugnant loathing, so much of blindest evil passion. A child, seeing it thus, might have grown old and gone to its grave in everlasting madness. It was the most terrifying, ghastly expression that I have ever seen on a human face—that, I am sure, could ever be upon a human face. He stared down on the dark house, which lay in a hollow, supreme in a heaven of hatred, as if he would raise his hand and strike its every brick to dust. But he did nothing. Then I heard a groan escape him and he turned away and fled into the darkness.

I followed him at a careful distance up the steep hill into Highgate and down again by other ways to the grim banks of Highgate cemetery, and here, in the dimmest corner, he stood for many minutes gripping the rails and staring through at some nearby grave. I heard a soft sound and was startled into realizing that this strange man wept. At last he turned away and walked rapidly back until we came again to the hill that had been without weekdays but was now knowing mad days to spare. We got back to the shop and an added sadness settled on poor Wicket.

My news disturbed him deeply. I found next day that all through the night of the fourteenth he had not slept, indeed, had not even been to bed, but had sat till morning in his chair behind the screen, the door unlocked and ready.

At eight o'clock came Dingle, demanding the news-

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paper; and fearing almost to speak to him, certainly to commit the folly of declaring a hoax, Wicket passed him the one I had set aside. Dingle glanced only at the date on the top, and from it to the calendar on the wall. His strange eyes were bloodshot and wild.

"To-morrow is the fifth?" he cried.

"Yes," the old man whispered carefully.

Dingle said no more. Laughing a wild, uncanny laugh, he turned and stumbled upstairs and locked himself in his room, refusing food through all the day. In the evening he sent Wicket for a bottle of whisky, and in less than five minutes we heard the empty bottle shatter to fragments, heard him laughing.

"I'm going to bed," said Wicket, a little before midnight. "Another night alone down here would send me as mad as he is. Why did he come here? What have *I* done?"

We went to bed, but not I, for one, to sleep. I did not undress. I sat beside the window, waiting for I knew not what, yet convinced that something must speedily come.

And come it did. I had not been in my chair half an hour before, from the room above, there came the fiercest shriek of pure horror that I shall ever hear.

Dashing to the stairs, ignoring the white and frightened face of poor old Wicket, peeping tremblingly from a door, I got somehow to Dingle's room, somehow with my shoulder smashed in the door. He was sitting half in, half out of bed, his whole body shaking, his wild eyes staring through the window at nothing that I could see.

"What's wrong?" I managed to gasp.

He turned those wild eyes upon me, and understood that I meant him no harm.

"Stay with me!" he begged. "Stay and do not let me sleep. I must not sleep. When I sleep I see the most awful

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things. I must not sleep! You understand? I want to sleep. You must not let me."

"But what——?"

"Don't talk," said he.

And so we sat through to dawn, he sitting shaking on the edge of the bed, I standing by the window watching him, neither of us saying a word. At daybreak he stood limply and fumbled for his clothes.

"To-day is the fifth of October," he said.

When he was dressed Dingle said to me, addressing the bed:

"Stay with me to-day."

"Yes," said I.

"I have got to make up my mind before night," he said.

"It is not easy."

And so I stayed with him in that strange room, watching his shaking, listening to his whispering, seeing that he was comfortable but uttering scarcely a word. The most fantastic day in my life.

He seemed altogether altered. He appeared to lean on me, obey me, look to me as he might have done, long ago, to his father. John Wicket hovered up and down uselessly, taking his cue from me and saying nothing. Towards nightfall, when the blue shades in the room turned to black, the trembling seized Dingle again and he would not leave my side; kept asking the hours to midnight.

"You are a kind Christian man," he said once; "the only one who has been kind to me for a long, long time. Life itself has been cruel to me. You are very kind. You are helping me to be strong, to keep a grip—you and the dreams. Those dreams! Every night for a week——! I am mad. I know I am very mad, but I can appreciate your kindness. Fancy to-day being the fifth of October! I

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couldn't believe it. It seemed all wrong. But I am going to be strong. Those dreams have terrified me. What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock," said I.

"Seven o'clock? Of the evening of October fifth? Yes. Yes. . . ."

He rose and crossed to a chest and opened a drawer. When he faced me again I was startled to see a revolver in his hand. Before I realized my action I had snatched it from him. But he did not protest.

"Yes, take it from me, please. And however I may ask, do not give it back to me before midnight. Keep it from me till the sixth is here. I shall be safe then. Be careful, though—it is loaded in every chamber."

I invited him downstairs. "The old man is a very kind man. He will be good to you. And it is more comfortable there."

Without speaking he waited for me to lead the way. Wicket was scared out of his life at first, but no man could have been gentler than Dingle and soon he was reassured.

"You are very good," the boarder whispered, without, however, looking at us. "I shall always like you." Then he turned to me with a little of the old fire blazing in his eyes. "Put that gun away! I cannot trust myself until this day is gone."

I slipped the thing into my pocket.

A long time passed before he spoke again. And when he did his roving eye had chanced to alight on the picture of Regina in 1899.

"Where is that?" he asked.

"Regina," old Wicket muttered.

"Ah!" And after difficult thought: "A man may start again there—live and forget, eh?"

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"A man may," old John admitted.

"Ah!"

Ten o'clock chimed—eleven; and a wild fever of emotion possessed Dingle. As the hands on the old clock face turned round on their last journey for that day, he fell into a loud weeping, and began to talk.

"I will tell you," he said. "I must, before it all goes. Everything seems to be going now. Dates. . . . I don't know where I am. I didn't know the fifth of October was so near. . . ."

He shuddered. Then he resumed:

"Once I loved a woman. She loved me, too—once. But I am not much of a man, and another came who was all man. He took her from me, and she liked to go. It broke my heart. But there is a justness somewhere, and her heart came to be broken too. I heard of the way he treated her. He killed her. He did. Not directly. He broke her soul into little bits and took five years to do it, and then one night she died, and left him as she had left me, and neither of us had her. It was on the fifth of October. Last year. . . ."

He glanced at the calendar on the wall and passed his hand across his eyes.

"I said I would kill him," he went on. "For a whole year I have said I would kill him. I made up my mind that when the date came round again I would send him to her. I have often gone and looked at his house and gloated over what was waiting for him. I bought the revolver. For weeks I have kept it loaded in every chamber, waiting for to-night. It is the fifth of October to-night.

"But I will not kill him now. I have a feeling that if I do kill him to-night I shall never kill him, and I cannot do it now. I have seen him in dreams, just what he would look like, all smashed about. I could have done it a little while

THE WEEK THAT HAPPENED TWICE ago, before I had the dreams, but now I am all shaken up by what I see in sleep. I have seen him just as he would look. Dreadful. . . .

"But I still might have killed him if you had not been kind to me. Nobody has been kind to me since she was kind to me, many years ago. You brought it all back, just what she used to be like. It all came back then. I didn't feel so mad. I am very mad, really.

"She loved him. I don't think she would like me to kill him.

"Keep that gun from me. I may take it and kill him yet, but you must not let me. There is time. What time is it?"

He looked at the clock. It was going up to twelve. Old Wicket leaned forward and dropped fresh coals on the fire, and the hands of the clock crept round on their last journey. "Tick, tick, tick," they went, hurrying, meeting. Then at last they met and there was a little purr and the clock began to strike.

Dingle looked up smiling, happy for the first time since I had met him.

"What time is that?" he asked.

"Midnight," I whispered.

"It is the sixth of October now?"

"Yes."

"Thank God!"

He rose and stood, strangely peaceful.

"I have been strong!" he said. "I did not kill him. I waited and was strong. I shall never kill him now. The time is past."

He looked from us again to where above the mantel the old photograph was framed.

"What place is that?" he asked.

"Regina," said Wicket. "In Canada."

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“A man may start again there—live and forget?”

“Yes.”

The man from the room above stooped and took up his hat and coat.

“I am going to Regina,” he said. “I will ask somebody the way. Look at my hands.” And he thrust them before us proudly, thin and shaking things. “Look at them! They are clean! No blood there! It is a beautiful feeling. If I had not had the dreams and you had not been kind to me, I might have been a murderer. I thank you. Good-bye.”

We heard him go along the shop and out and close the door. Soon his footsteps vanished down the hill.

“Thank the Lord!” muttered little Wicket, stirring to poke the fire to flame. “I am so glad he has gone. It has been dreadful. I am an older man than I was before it happened.”

It was some time afterwards that I dragged the revolver from my pocket.

“Good Lord!” I cried. “I—I wonder where he had been!”

“When?” said Wicket.

“On—the fifth of October,” I replied. “The night he first came here. And I wonder what lies behind the shutters of that dark house at Highgate. Look!”

I spilled the cartridges out in the palm of my hand and showed him. Two of them were spent.

BY
ARTHUR TUCKERMAN



SUMATRA SMOKE

When Electrical Enterprises Ltd., of Glasgow, that old and conscientious firm, surprised itself by wangling a Dutch contract through shrewd bidding and a favourable rate of exchange, they decided that James McKay was the very man to go to Java. Young James couldn't speak Dutch; nor could anyone else in the firm, for that matter. But at twenty-four he had an air about him. He had already impressed several foreigners by his demeanour, and it was clear that such obstacles as tropical undergrowth would only serve to increase his tenacity. He was serious, pipe-smoking, and altogether reliable.

At the beginning of that long sunlit voyage to Soerabaya, James was a little awed by the splendours of the Dutch ship. He hadn't lived within ten miles of the Clydebank shipyards for nothing. Later, however, he transferred his quiet devotion to blue-eyed Katje. It merely happened that he met the ship first—otherwise he wouldn't have met Katje. Otherwise he wouldn't have been drawn relentlessly, in his innocent way, towards the core of that dark mystery which lay beneath the

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palms of Soerabaya in a sunset like a red lacquer fan.

James' first love, then, as an admirer of mechanical perfection, was the ship. And certainly that early glimpse of her at Southampton, where she was calling on her way to Java from Amsterdam, was an eye-opener. Mounting the gangway on that crisp February morning James gaped at the clean sweep of the *Frans Hals*' pearl-grey hull; at the jaunty rake of her short masts and streamlined funnels. The promenade deck, as wide as a playground, had been holystoned whiter than snow; and there were azalea-filled boxes in the deep windows of her public lounge. James, loyal to the hammered echoes of the Clydebank, couldn't help being astonished at such evidence of foreign progress. The Dutch were coming along; they could build a ship, he admitted handsomely.

A girl strolled past him on the deck. A miniature girl. A compact pocket-venus in trim grey tweeds. Hatless, too. Lord, what hair, thought James. More blinding than the morning sun, it swept obliquely across a sharply modelled, golden-brown brow. Outdoor Nordic type. Ice-blue eyes that somehow made you think of deep northern waters in midsummer. So they grew like that in Holland, did they? We live to learn, thought James. Then the *Frans Hals*' whistle blew, and it wasn't in the least like the hoarse, throaty voices which penetrated a Clyde fog. It was a clear, frosty bugle note, produced by electricity, strange and modern and efficient.

Electrical Enterprises had presented him with a pretty cushy job, James decided, turning into the ship's lounge. Travelling as a first-class passenger aboard the star motor liner of the Royal Java Lloyd. Outside cabin on "A" deck, with private shower, and all expenses paid! Nothing to do but loaf in the sunshine, in white flannels, for three

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whole weeks. He walked into the lounge of the *Frans Hals* feeling as if he owned the world. The room, though, appalled his quiet nature by its gorgeousness. It was furnished in claret-coloured satin. Its mahogany walls were inlaid with weird scenes from Javanese mythology, and the glass dome above looked as big as a Glasgow station—only a good deal cleaner.

A bald and rotund personage in a blue frock coat with gold buttons approached him. He must at least be a Dutch bishop, James considered, until the man bowed courteously and said: "I am Baron van Goes, the purser of this ship. A letter of introduction has come from our agents. You are Mr. James McKay, isn't it so?"

"It is so," James agreed cheerfully.

"Come, then, to the smoking-room," the baron said. "And we shall have some lager and Edam cheese sandwiches—would you like?"

"I would like," James said, following his portly and oscillating figure down a corridor to a vast smoking-room with a red-tiled floor and dark, oaken walls decorated with blue Delft pottery.

The *Frans Hals* was a ship-and-a-half, James decided enthusiastically. Modern wasn't the word for her. She purred out of her Southampton dock with a gliding motion that was more like the movement of a £2,000 car than a 20,000-ton ship. After luncheon Baron van Goes took him on a tour of inspection. They visited the engine-room with its tall, gleaming Burmeister and Wain motors. They glanced in at the electric laundry; the bakery; the swimming pool; the de luxe cabins with their satin-quilted beds and porcelain-tiled needle showers.

"A fine ship, isn't it so?" the baron asked proudly.

"It is so," James agreed.

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By the time the *Frans Hals* had rounded Cape Finisterre, and had chuff-chuffed into the cobalt expanse of the Mediterranean, James knew a good many of the two hundred pink-cheeked, flaxen-haired passengers who were bound for the Dutch East Indies. And he had no doubt as to which was his favourite. Katje Deterling—the one whose eyes were bluer than midsummer waters, and whose wheat-coloured hair swept diagonally across a golden-brown brow—came from Dordrecht, which isn't far from Rotterdam. Katje was nineteen at the time. And when she laughed and shook her head at some of James' pleasant nonsense, her hair came tumbling down in an s-shaped lock over her eyes, so that she had to thrust it back—still laughing. She never wore a hat, but she usually wore a sweater of fine, sheer wool and a plaid or a tweed skirt, under which garments her very neat figure resembled some lovely little Greek statue.

James danced with Katje at the fancy dress ball which was held off the coast of Spain. He took her all over Gibraltar in a high-backed, squeaky carriage. He gave her lunch at the Miramar, above the terraced streets of Genoa, and he bought her a Pompeian cigarette case made of olivewood and decorated with obese cupids. They never talked very much when they were together, although Katje spoke perfect English, having been educated at a school near Brighton. They felt, somehow, that they did not need to talk. They were completely happy in a cosy comfortable way, just being together—as if they had known each other for years. And in this respect James was convinced that they were different from all other couples. On a higher plane, perhaps. . . . On blue-and-gold Mediterranean mornings they played deck tennis, and swam in the ship's pool.

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On the night before the *Frans Hals* reached Port Said there was another dance, and Katje appeared in a white taffeta dress with rosebuds around the collar. Some of the Amsterdam diamond men's wives on board tittered at the dress—because it looked so very much like Dordrecht. But to James it only needed a pair of wings to complete it—so much so, in fact, that he forgot all about Electrical Enterprises Ltd., and why he was on board the *Frans Hals*, and everything else. He only knew that Katje's eyes were more lustrous than the Egyptian stars above the boat deck and that her voice was even softer than the Egyptian breeze which was blowing from off the starboard bow. And so, approximately fifty knots off Port Said, James McKay went off the deep end—as he would have put it. He took Katje's hand, where it rested on the taffrail, squeezed it, and managed to say in a shaky voice, after a soul-shattering effort: "Katje!"

That was all he contrived to say. Now Katje came from Dordrecht, which you couldn't possible term a worldly place, once you had gazed on its quiet streets and steep-gabled houses under the shadow of the old Groote Kerke. Nevertheless she knew what it meant when a usually suave and easy-going young man became suddenly beet-coloured and inarticulate. She withdrew her hand gently, and said: "I am going out to Java to get married, James. Did you not know that? I thought Baron van Goes might have told you."

Whereupon the Egyptian stars lost their lustre for James, and he even became aware that the offshore breeze held a hint of sewage which he hadn't noticed before. Still, one had to take such information with a stiff upper lip, hadn't one? Part of the game, what? He said to Katje, trying to be jaunty, and hoping that she couldn't see his

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face in the dim light of the boat deck: "I hope he's a nice lad, Katje. I know he's a damn lucky one."

After that they went below to dance. But they didn't have very much to talk about, and the intervals seemed longer than usual. After Katje had gone to bed James took three stiffish brandies in the bar—a rare enough performance for him.

He couldn't keep away from her, though. It is like that on board ship. So he told himself sharply: "I'll play fair. By God, I will! On account of that other lad. Some fat-bellied, pink-cheeked colonial, placidly awaiting her under the palms, curse him!" The processes of James McKay's mind were not complex; never had been. He continued to play about with Katje. Swimming, dancing, deck tennis. And she accepted his attentions gracefully, in a non-committal way—as little blonde Nordics know how to do so well. The only difference being, as James explained gravely to the baron, that there wasn't any nonsense in the offing. "—Just good pals, and so on. And when picking out a pal for a long voyage, one might as well pick out a bonny one, don't you think?"

The baron, who was after all a Continental, considered this reaction to life strangely pure and simple. He glanced furtively at James McKay's lean, honest, freckled face, at his grave grey eyes, and found exactly what he expected to find—sincerity and decency. And he wasn't worried on account of the girl, but only on account of James, for he had seen in his past career what a week of Mediterranean moonlight could do to many a self-respecting young man. He was aware, too, of that amazingly luscious quality which northern young blondes assumed when they became wrapped in their first gauze of that identical moonlight. And the *Frans Hals* was to continue sailing

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southwards, for over two weeks more. The baron said nothing to James, because it wasn't his business. He only thought the whole occurrence an immense pity, since Katje was so definitely committed. When you became engaged in Dordrecht, as the baron well knew, you became engaged with a vengeance. Packed in tissue paper, so to speak—so that no young Dordrechter dared to make any mistake about it, unless he happened to be a cad.

Katje trusted James, and decided that they could continue to be good friends. Young girls often make such decisions, with a toss of the head, without looking at the other side of the picture. She told him about her past life. Her father, a Dordrecht jeweller and a widower, had sent her to England to school. He had been ambitious for her, and he had hoped to enlarge her life beyond the confines of that provincial spirit which ruled somewhat ruthlessly within the shadows of the old Groote Kerke.

"I spent three years at Brighton in school," she told James. They were sitting on the boat-deck while the *Frans Hals* purred slowly along the straight silver track of the Suez Canal. The sun shone with a blessed warmth, and the sky was a pure robin's-egg blue.

"I loved England," Katje said. "I met my fiancé there."

"Tell me about him," James said listlessly. He didn't want to hear about the lad at all, but it seemed the right thing to say at the moment.

"Most men do not want to hear about one's fiancé," Katje said, swinging her legs from the skylight on which they were seated, and brushing that straying lock back from her forehead. She fixed her gaze on the low-lying sandy panorama of the Egyptian shore and frowned a little.

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James told her earnestly: "You're a verra sweet girl, Katje. The finest I've met. I'd merely like to be cairtain that you're to be happy out there in Java."

"Oh, but I shall be," she assured him, with all the glorious conviction of nineteen. James felt a bit queer inside at that very definite statement, because even he—uncomplex as he was—knew that you couldn't go about making such rash predictions about life. Even he knew how often that hard, stinging confidence of youth became shattered, or at least tarnished by drab experience.

"Klaes is a splendid man," Katje said. "We met at a dance in a Brighton hotel, where I had joined Father over the Christmas holidays. That was three years ago, just think of it! I was only sixteen, and Klaes was twenty-two. He was then on his way out to Java, where he had been appointed assistant to the Batavia branch of the Dutch Indian Petroleum. A very young man, you know, for such a big job. He wrote to me twice a month after that, for a year. Then came a time when he was transferred to Amboina, in the Archipelago. For nearly two years I did not hear from him, and Father and I were terribly worried. You see, Klaes and I had a sort of understanding —"

James nodded, wondering sadly how any man in the world could go for two years without writing to Katje, if he had "a sort of understanding" with her.

"Last October", Katje continued, "poor Father died very suddenly in Dordrecht. Then I felt sadder and lonelier than ever, for I had practically given up Klaes. But all at once, one morning last month, I received a long letter from him. Oh, a very beautiful letter! It explained everything. It seems that Amboina is away off the regular mail route. Also Klaes had been at an up-country post, and he

had been ill for many months with some kind of fever."

She faced James, her eyes shining.

"Klaes sent for me. I am going out to him, and that is why I am so happy."

James, a little stiffly because he couldn't help it, wished her all the luck in the world. And presently he excused himself, on the grounds that he had an appointment with Mr. Topps, for a noon glass of schnapps in the bar.

Mr. Topps was known to the rest of the passengers as the ship's character, which was merely their lazy-minded way of describing an individual whom they couldn't quite classify. He came from Katje's town, Dordrecht, but he had spent most of his life roaming about the world. He had owned coffee and tobacco plantations in Java and Sumatra, and he had once been a district commissioner in Dutch Borneo. Mr. Topps had lived long and well. He had an enlarged stomach, an enlarged liver, and an enlarged heart; but none of these impediments appeared to worry him in the least. His vast, good-natured countenance was the colour of a tropical sunset, and the whites of his mild blue eyes were criss-crossed with a pattern of scarlet threads. He navigated with difficulty, shifting his pongee-draped three hundred pounds with the aid of a malacca cane. A wreck of a man, if you were cruel enough to regard him in that light; but a highly agreeable and convivial wreck, nevertheless. Under his cockatoo's crest of strong white hair you encountered a gaze as candid as a small boy's. He had a pure heart. This you knew instinctively, despite the inevitable row of empty schnapps glasses on his favourite table in the *Frans Hals*' smoking-room.

Mr. Topp seemed to worship Katje. He'd bravely accompany her for his morning mile around the promenade

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deck, his short, rheumatic legs striving desperately to keep up with the swift patter of her heels. This was Katje's secret hope for his physical regeneration. But long before the noon whistle blew he'd sink gratefully on to the well-padded sofa of his paradise—the smoking-room—ready for his first bottle of Amstel lager. Mr. Topps believed in lager before noon; schnapps from noon onwards—and so on, right round the clock. And when he wasn't drinking he'd be smoking a long, pale, impressive-looking Sumatra cheroot, grown upon his own plantations, as he'd proudly explain.

"You'll die early," Katje warned him. There was no primness or self-conscious severity in her tone; merely a warm affection. He had brought her toys in Dordrecht when she had been a little girl, and he had known her father. Katje was ready, almost, to canonize anybody who had known her father.

"So I will, my dear," Mr. Topps rumbled in his congested voice.

"So I will die early. But I shall have lived magnificently for sixty-eight years. I shall have been to many strange places, and shall have seen many strange things. Which is more than most Hollanders can say. A Dutchman never becomes his full self until he travels. And the fuller the better, I say."

Whereupon he winked at Katje, and roared to the Javanese bar-boys who were squatting, like a group of marmosets, in a patch of sunshine near the smoking-room door. "Jonghes! jonghes! Schnapps!"

Katje frowned, and tried hard to look severe. "You should be spanked," she said, "until you learn to grow up." And she walked away with a defiant little swing to her skirt, which she somehow managed whenever she was slightly annoyed about anything.

S U M A T R A S M O K E

Mr. Topps, though, wasn't as happy as he pretended to be. James McKay, joining him after leaving Katje on the boat-deck, discovered this. He caught Mr. Topps alone, wrapped in his own thoughts. And he was amazed at the quality of sadness momentarily revealed in that highly-tinted, fleshy face, and also at the dim pathos of the eyes. It became clear that Mr. Topps' past hadn't been entirely a pageant of glamour and felicity, as he liked to imply. But James, being young and possessing the egotism of youth, had no time to analyse the troubles of an elderly gentleman. He was far too absorbed in a matter of his own.

"Consairning this lad, Klaes Haas," he remarked. He'd been waiting for just such a chance to converse alone with Mr. Topps. "There's something a wee bit fishy in his Amboina story, is there not?"

Mr. Topps shifted his heavy body slowly and painfully, and focused upon him a gaze that was, to say the least, disconcertingly blank. And to James, who was not insensitive, the hint was more than plain.

"Something fishy? What do you mean? Katje is engaged to him, isn't she?"

James became slightly flustered, aware that he had probably committed a breach of etiquette. It was evident that Mr. Topps was entirely unwilling to discuss Katje's engagement. Perhaps he held it sacred. Perhaps he even resented James' attentions to Katje. Anyway, James swiftly changed the subject, commenting upon the ship's impending arrival at Port Tewfik, and they ordered drinks; Mr. Topps, becoming more cordial, offered him one of his Sumatra cheroots. It was long and pale, and wore a narrow yellow band bearing the word "Concordia" in black letters. "That", Mr. Topps explained, "is the

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name of my plantation in Sumatra, not far from Medan. My tobacco has always been rated as one of the best in the colony."

James considered the cigar extremely good, and told him so. And over his second glass of schnapps Mr. Topps grew even more cordial. He had apparently forgotten the brief moment of unpleasantness concerning Klaes Haas. James hadn't, however. Later, just before lunch, he went to Baron van Goes, the purser, this time determined to be more tactful in his approach to a delicate subject.

"There's something that has been puzzling me about Katje's story," he said. "I must talk to someone about it, Baron. Will you promise me to keep it under your hat, if I do?"

"I will," the baron assured him solemnly, making a judicial gable of his fingers, and leaning back in his swivel chair. "You are wanting to talk about Katje? Everyone is wanting to talk about Katje. She is the most popular passenger on the ship, isn't it so?"

James nodded impatiently.

"You know that map and time-table of the K.P.M. services in the Malay Archipelago, which are framed out there in the main companionway? I've been studying them. I see that the K.P.M. have a regular monthly steamer calling at Amboina. Now for two years this lad, Klaes Haas, didn't write to Katje, claiming that he was off the regular mail route. Even if he'd been up-country he could have got a letter to Holland in that time. What do you make of it?"

The baron was silent for a while, toying with an ivory paper-cutter on his desk. Then he lighted his big, blunt meerschaum pipe and puffed at it stolidly.

"More curious than that is something else," he finally

Do you know the name of my friend

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stated. "Katje was not hearing from him until last month—until January."

"What", James demanded, "is so strange about that?"

"Well," said the baron, emitting voluminous clouds of smoke, so that he resembled a Dutch freighter leaving port in a squall, "well, I will tell you. I am not a gossip. But since you open the matter yourself, I admit that I am being puzzled. I am knowing men pretty well, especially our Insulinde Dutch, being in the colonial service twenty years already. When a young man is in love out there with a girl in Holland he is writing often. More so, even, when he is in lonely places. He is thinking much of her. He is writing by camp fire, perhaps, or by the lamp-light of a pasangrahan hut—isn't it so? Well, this man Haas is not writing for two whole years.

"Now, please to figure this out for yourself. Simple mathematics. Katje is at last hearing from him in the beginning of January. It is taking a letter five or six weeks, depending on connections, to go from Amboina to Holland. That is bringing us back to the middle of November. That is when Haas wrote his letter."

James nodded wonderingly.

"Oppositely," continued the baron, with a rising note of triumph in his voice, "it is taking the Holland newspapers five or six weeks to reach Amboina. You are following me, please? We are now assuming that Haas, when he is writing that letter to Katje—after two years' silence—has just received the Amsterdam newspapers of the first week in October. And what do those newspapers say? Shall I tell you? They are saying that Katje's father, Johannes Deterling, the Dordrecht jeweller, has just died. They are saying, too, that to everyone's surprise he is dying quite wealthy, because he has made some shrewd

oh you see this page

frankly.

now dear to

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investments. They are saying that little Katje will be left over a million guilders."

"Which simply means that Katje is fairly well off," said James slowly. "Still I don't follow——"

The baron sighed.

"My dear boy. For two years that man is silent. Then, suddenly, he is being all interested again in Katje. Dutch Indian Petroleum employees are not rich. To such a man Katje has inherited a fortune. I don't like it, I tell you. I don't like it."

"I see," said James. "I see." He nodded several times; then slowly clenched his fists, so that the knuckles turned white. Later, after leaving the purser's office, he admitted to himself that he had obtained nothing definite. There was a supposition in the air that Katje's fiancé might be a shrewd rascal, also a liar, but no actual proof. Certainly he, James, was in no position to speak to Katje about it. However, he asked Mr. Topps in a casual way: "Are you not going to attend Katje's wedding in Batavia? My own job takes me on to Soerabaya. But I'd like to hear, later, whether you think she's going to be happy."

"Heavens, no," Mr. Topps said briskly. "I will have no time for festivities in Java. I will hardly be in Batavia at all. I am going up to Soekaboemi, where my agents are waiting for me, to sell a tea estate. I didn't even know Katje was on board, until two days out from Holland."

Selfish old devil, thought James. Doesn't give a hoot about Katje. But he kept his counsel.

When the *Frans Hals* reached Port Tewfik that afternoon James took Katje ashore, and for an hour or two they wandered about the red-earthed streets under the dusty little lebbek trees. There wasn't very much to see in Port Tewfik; but on their way back to the tender landing

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they rounded a corner and came suddenly upon a surging throng outside an Arab café. And there, seated at a tin table under a striped awning, was Mr. Topps, looking even more crimson-faced and congested than usual. His white hair was wildly disarranged, and he was singing a loud and lusty Dutch song in a horribly cracked voice. At least thirty natives—the inevitable Egyptian gathering of sherbet sellers, bead merchants, and boot-blacks—had gathered round him, gaping and grinning. Katje went straight up to him, and said in a firm voice: "Mr. Topps, the last tender is leaving in ten minutes."

He ceased singing abruptly, and stared at her.

"Katje," he said. "Dear l'il Katje. . . ."

Then he resumed his song, keeping time by hammering on the tin table with a glass.

James and Katje paid his bill, lifted him from his chair, and together they contrived to get him down the street to the tender. They were hemmed in by a screaming, jeering, dusty mob of natives. Mr. Topps had lost his Malacca cane at some stage of the afternoon's revelry which he had privately planned for himself, and his legs had lost their power of support as well as their motive force. Also, he appeared resentful at Katje's interference with his programme. Finally he sank like a bag of meal on to the floor of the tender, and lay there—while Katje turned her head and wept a little. The tender went putting out to the *Frans Hals*, screeching for headway amidst a tangle of native feluccas, and making a great curved scratch upon the clear mirror of the bay. It took ten minutes, and the combined efforts of four Dutch sailors, to hoist Mr. Topps up the long accommodation ladder.

Hearing the story the next day, while the *Frans Hals* ploughed her way through the glaring furnace of the Red

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Sea, Mr. Topps burst into tears, and swore to Katje that he'd never touch a drop again, which he didn't—for five whole days. Her act of rescue appeared to have touched his heart. As for Katje, she became kinder than ever to him, now that she realized the extent of his weakness. She had an instinctive ability to gauge human nature, and she possessed all the singular directness and mental clarity of a child still unconfused by non-essentials. To her Mr. Topps remained a good and honest Christian, well worth trying to save, in spite of his passion for schnapps. Like James McKay she had begun to comprehend that his solitary and sometimes weirdly musical orgies were merely a method of escape from a certain angry, blinding despair about life, a heavy shadow which fell upon him whenever he was left alone for any length of time. It was as if he were lacerated by some memory, and couldn't quite stand the contemplation of it in all sobriety. Possibly his own sins, thought James, who was privately sceptical about Katje's self-appointed task of regeneration. . . . At any rate she too had caught a glimpse of the pathos in Mr. Topps' eyes when he sat alone, and she resolved that he must have perpetual company—at least until he safely reached his tea estate near Soekaboemi. With this in view she paced the deck with him, under the torrid tropic awnings, and read aloud to him in the cool lounge during those long, blazing, Red Sea afternoons.

By the time the ship passed Perim, and veered out into the wide freedom of the Indian Ocean, James McKay was a fairly unhappy young man. Happy in Katje's presence, yet haunted by defeat whenever she deserted him. James perceived that Katje was actually manacled to another man by a stolid destiny more potent than any law. He realized that in Katje's milieu of respectable Dutch

bourgeoisie a betrothal was no less serious a matter than death. Everyone on board knew that she was engaged, and speculated glibly on the nature of the fortunate young man concerned. To have questioned the sanctity of the bond, James knew, was out of the question. And Katje herself wouldn't allow him to voice what she considered to be desperate and unlawful sentiments—although she didn't seem to mind his constant company. But there were ways round this. Such as when they were dancing one evening, just before reaching Colombo, and the ship's orchestra burst into a peculiarly defiant little melody entitled: "You Can't Stop Me from Loving You." James grinned and jerked his thumb towards the music, and winked down at Katje. She giggled, flushed, but said nothing. No reprimand. Progress, James told himself elatedly. Progress. . . .

When the *Frans Hals* reached Colombo Katje received a cable. She came running down the promenade deck, waving the buff-coloured envelope, and opened it in the presence of James and Mr. Topps, who were watching the harbour traffic from the taffrail.

"DEAREST I AM WAITING IMPATIENTLY"—she translated—"HAVE BEEN TRANSFERRED TO SOERABAYA WILL MEET SHIP THERE DON'T GET OFF AT BATAVIA—KLAES."

Her face fell. "Oh," she cried. "That's cruel! We had arranged so carefully to meet at Batavia, and now I'll have two or three days more on board until I see him. The D.I.P. people must be horrible, not to give him leave to meet me."

Mr. Topps, smoking one of his long cheroots, frowned and said nothing. James privately rejoiced that Katje

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was going to continue her voyage down the Java coast to the eastern end of the island, to his own destination; but he kept his elation to himself, seeing that Katje wasn't particularly happy about the cable. Now, perhaps, he'd be able to encounter the elusive Klaes Haas; to size him up, and to see if he was truly worthy of Katje. If he wasn't—well, he hadn't any plans, but he felt that anything might happen. . . .

"Katje's fiancé has been transferred to Soerabaya," he told Baron von Goes innocently at lunch that day.

"Transferred?" said the baron. "The D.I.P. have no branch at Soerabaya. They had to surrender that territory to their competitors long ago."

This gave James something to think about. He persuaded the baron to send a confidential radio to one of his friends at D.I.P. headquarters in Batavia. The reply came back within a few hours. The D.I.P. had discharged Haas two years previously, and had no knowledge of his subsequent movements. James facing a problem, ventured to tackle Mr. Topps with his news.

"Lad's lost his job, and is pretending he hasn't," he said. "Someone must tell Katje."

Mr. Topps pooh-poohed the idea.

"Gossip," he said airily. "Surmise. The man's waiting out there to marry her. That should be enough for you. Why can't you leave the girl's affairs alone?"

James flushed, but controlled himself, realizing the deleterious effects of steady tippling and a relentless, fraying heat upon Mr. Topps' character. Still, he decided, it was high time that he made his own position clear. So he said, with considerable dignity and simplicity: "I cannot help it. I would do anything in the world for that lass—whether you consider it my business or not. She's

an orphan, going out to a strange land all alone, to get married. And there's something queer in this lad's behaviour, you must admit. Anyway, if you're not willing to continue on board to Soerabaya, and look Haas over to see if he's clean and above-board—why, I'll damn well do it myself. Only, you're an older man, a Hollander, and you've known her since she was a kid. And I'm thinking it would be more appropriate if you took over the job."

All the fundamental integrity of his nature emerged in that plea. But Mr. Topps was not impressed.

"I can't do it, my boy," he said, puffing violently at his cheroot. "I have men waiting for me at Soekaboemi, to close the deal on that tea plantation. They're expecting me to land at Batavia. Personally, I think you've worked yourself into a state about this fellow Haas."

James shrugged his shoulders, and walked away gloomily. He felt that he'd forced his hand about to the limit. After all, he was a solitary Scotsman among a shipload of foreigners, and one was compelled to be tactful under such circumstances. As for his relationship with Katje, it continued, in the scented breezes and mother-of-pearl moonlight of the Straits of Malacca, on the same friendly basis. He couldn't inform her that her precious Haas had been given the sack by the Dutch Indian Petroleum. To get the sack in a far-distant colony wasn't pleasant. It was, as he told himself, a serious matter. Besides, the man might simply have run into one of those occasional streaks of bad luck—nothing more. Illness, and all that. No, Katje wasn't the kind of girl in whom you could plant the seeds of disloyalty, even if you wanted to. She'd love the lad all the more if he'd struck a cruel spell. . . . Oh, he knew her all right, and he frankly faced the helplessness

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of his own position. A foreigner, a rank outsider, gone dotty over a thoroughly engaged young woman, upon whom he hadn't the remotest claims.

None of this reasoning, however, assuaged the persistent, dull ache in his heart, a symptom which he'd never known before, and which astounded him and rendered him miserable. But he remained quiet, in his Scotch way, alternately happy and depressed according to the amount of time Katje passed with him, and keeping his eyes open for any sudden change in the situation.

At Tandjong Priok, the first Java port of call, Mr. Topps adhered to his plans, assembled his baggage, and went ashore to take the electric train up to Batavia. He bade James and Katje good-bye hurriedly, and was among the first group of passengers down the gangway. He wasn't going to waste any of his valuable time, James saw, worrying about Katje—not when those tea plantations were waiting for a bidder. Not he. Anyway, it was an ill wind that blew nobody any good. James perceived, suddenly and clearly, that Mr. Topps' removal of his utterly useless carcass had simplified the problem of Katje. He, James, was now completely free to check-up on Klaes Haas. And he felt a sort of beastly pride, of which he was slightly ashamed, at the confirmation of his suspicions that Mr. Topps was fundamentally unreliable.

After leaving Tandjong Priok the *Frans Hals* chugged eastwards on an opal sea, with the mauve mountains of Java dimly outlined against a pale horizon. Each propeller revolution, each knot registered on the log, made James McKay a sadder man. An imponderable melancholy stole over him which, he felt sure, not all the exotic cities of the East, all the emerald-margined shores, could ever dispel. And seeing Katje away up in the bows of the ship,

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on the afternoon they were due in Soerabaya, her wheat-coloured hair swept back in a rippling line from her sharply-moulded brow, her eager expression like that of a forward-looking Viking as she gazed upon an immemorably calm sea, he faced the bitter truth. An interlude, and nothing more, was approaching its normal end. And James felt at that moment as if something had cracked inside him. He believed that life would never again be so brilliantly coloured, so ecstatic, so lavish in its hints of possible future gifts. . . . What had happened, he again reminded himself, was that he'd gone off the deep end, absolutely, over someone else's girl. And that wasn't being done. Not that one could help it; but one didn't go around blabbing about it. As usual, his mind worked on elementary lines. Buck up, old man, he told himself. And never, never tell her the truth.

But there was no escaping Katje. Here she was, approaching him gaily, waving her hand, the offshore breeze moulding her short white skirt about her lovely little legs, silhouetting all her immaturity, so that his heart hammered and he turned a slow, deep red. Damn women, anyway, James swore silently, loving Katje as he did. Damn them for their power to turn a man into a blasted, trembling fool of a creature. . . . He tried, even, to dive into a nearby companionway door. But Katje must have noticed something, for she laid a hand on his arm, and looking at him steadily with her candid, ice-blue eyes she said: "James, you are sad. You are not happy."

"Not much reason to be," he admitted grimly, kicking a stray cigarette end across the deck.

A vertical frown appeared on her forehead.

"It isn't about me?"

He nodded, his eyes failing to meet hers. Perhaps his

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very inarticulateness reached her heart. At any rate, she flushed suddenly, as if overwhelmed by the facing of an astonishing truth. "I understand now," she said. "Oh, I am so sorry! I wouldn't have hurt you for anything. You have been a dear."

"I've been a kid," he blurted out. "That's what I've been. I fancied we could binge about together, and so on. But it doesn't work, don't you see? I mean—I did not know what being in love was like. Simply that."

He paused, appalled at his own loquaciousness. So that was how he kept a promise to himself, was it? Blabbing, at the very first occasion. He braced himself up sharply. "Well, cheer up. We'll be in Soerabaya this evening. And you're not to worry about me. I've a mess of work on hand. I'm a busy man, Katje. . . ."

Then, abruptly, he swung on his heels and left her. Left her staring after him, startled at the tremendous discovery she'd made. But James had his back turned—luckily, perhaps. He was already unhappy enough. He sought a quiet section of the boat-deck where he lighted his pipe and paced up and down, hands behind his back, head bent, attempting to face realities. Another lad's girl. . . . Hell on earth, was it not?

At five the Diesel motors ceased purring, and the pilot came aboard. In the sudden, overheated stillness the *Frans Hals*' bow swung slowly towards the Java shore. She veered past a line of fishing stakes, and upon the glassy pane of the sea ahead there were a dozen native praus, their sails like so many dark triangles crayoned on the apricot sky. The land-fall loomed closer, a seemingly impenetrable ink-blue fringe of vegetation. But there was an opening, and the *Frans Hals* nosed it out.

Katje hung over the rail, scanning the crowds that

lined the dock, while a row of Javanese coolies tugged and slanted at the mooring ropes. Katje was excited, Baron van Goes realized, watching her narrowly from his post at the head of the gangway; but it was a feverish, unnatural excitement rather than a manifestation of normal happiness. And while he speculated upon this a Madurese boy, surly and unwashed, came slouching up the gangway and handed him a crumpled note. Baron van Goes looked at the name scrawled upon it, and nodded towards Katje. The boy ambled over to her in his flat-footed way. The baron watched: saw Katje unfold the paper; didn't miss the swift and pitiful look of bewilderment that came into her face. And the baron being a canny man, waited.

Presently she came over to him, and gave him the note. She spoke to him in Dutch. "One would think that he could manage his affairs better, baron. He cannot get away from his work until nine, and he tells me to meet him at the Hotel Des Indes—wherever that is." Her voice was small, weary, and disillusioned.

The baron looked at the unsteady writing trailing diagonally across a sweat-stained slip of paper, and instantly drew his own conclusions. He engaged the Madurese boy in a sudden sharp volley of questions. The Madurese, shifty-eyed, was not inclined to be communicative until the baron began vaguely to finger a five-guilder note. Then the boy found his tongue, in Malay. The baron listened, and wrote something on the back of Klaes Haas' message. He thrust it into his own pocket, gave the boy the money, and dismissed him.

"Take a taxi up to the Hotel Des Indes," he instructed Katje briskly. "You can see the housekeeper there, a fine woman who will look after you if you mention my name. I will get James McKay to accompany you, as I cannot

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leave the ship now. It is a pity about Haas, but I am sure he will be along about nine as he promises."

He then left her and went into his office. James McKay was there, drumming his fingers on the desk.

"You are taking Katje up to the Hotel des Indes," the baron said. And he handed the crumpled note to James. "This may interest you—especially the address, which I have written on the back. Haas did not appear, but he intends to meet her at nine. Unfortunately I am too busy to leave the ship, as we are sailing again tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. But you can take care of this matter— isn't it so?"

James glanced at the filthy slip of paper, understood the baron perfectly.

"I think you can leave this to me," he said quietly. "I'll be dropping back here during the evening, to tell you the results. Also to get my luggage. I don't fancy a flossy hotel like that—not on my allowance for expenses."

"Good luck," said the baron.

James joined Katje on deck, and as soon as she had collected her baggage, they went ashore. Outside the customs building he hailed a taxi, and together they drove up the long, dusty, tamarind-lined avenue towards Soerabaya. In the late, slanting sunlight the road, margined by the shining ribbon of a canal, was filled with chattering groups of Chinese and Malays. Katje and James did not talk much during the drive. They were silent—as people will be when an interlude is nearing its end. It was as if, James thought suddenly, they were each striving to preserve some permanent visual memory. . . . But when at last, they stood in the lounge of the hotel beside her small pyramid of luggage, she asked him timidly: "What are your plans now, James?"

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To James she looked, all of a sudden, very small and forlorn in that vast white tropical hotel, with all its strange clients in linen clothes seated in wicker chairs, consuming iced drinks, and staring at each new arrival. They appeared, James thought, like so many fantastic characters in a comic opera.

"Oh," he said casually, "I'll be taking a look-see about the town. Rum-looking place I should say. Also, I must find diggings of some sort. I'll be back about nine, though. I'd like to meet your fiancé."

She smiled wanly.

"Don't forget," she said.

After she had gone to her room he borrowed a map from the hall-porter and studied it. Then he left the hotel and strolled out into the twilight. A great stillness had crept upon the town. Above the tamarind trees, and the bright path of the canal, the last vestiges of a tropical sunset still lingered, an outspread fan of scarlet lacquer upon the serene sky. James proceeded leisurely along the canal, glancing at the occasional groups of Javanese bathing modestly from little flights of stone steps, and rehearsing in his mind what he'd say to Klaes Haas. Just a quiet chat. A look-see. Find out whether the lad had any stuffing in him, so to speak, and whether there was any truth in all this circumstantial evidence against him. Mustn't be prejudiced, James warned himself. Must give the lad a fair chance. But he'd be hanged if he'd desert Katje, all alone in Soerabaya, until he found out what was what.

Hullo, here he was already! A side street of shoddy-looking, one-story villas in white plaster. Ornate but not particularly prepossessing. Rather like decayed wedding cakes. . . . Haas would do better for himself, James decided

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grimly, after he'd married Katje. No doubt of that. He walked up to the door of one of the villas, and rang the bell. No answer. Maybe Haas was still out on business; they had queer hours in these foreign places. No. He could see a lamp shining in a window to the right of the door; and there was someone sitting in there, beyond a hanging curtain of beads, dressed in white. James rang again, without result. He pushed the front door open impatiently, and strode in. The door between the dark little hallway and the room on the right was ajar. He opened it wider. A simple room, furnished with a plain circular table, a bronze lamp, a small bookcase, and a couple of rattan chairs. The place had a bare, tropical look about it. One of the rattan chairs had its back to the door, and James saw the top of a man's dark head protruding above it. He found himself absorbing every detail of the room suddenly, not knowing exactly why; and at the same time he was aware of a sharp tingling in his scalp. I'm getting the wind up, thought James. Wonder why? The silence of the room, for one thing. The smoky, dead, flat silence of it. He heard himself saying to the man in the chair: "Good evening."

No answer. James's forehead dampened; also his wrists. He took two swift strides round the table, and faced the man; then stiffened with the shock of what he saw there.

Although Klaes Haas was dead, he didn't look unlike the photograph that Katje had once shown James. A youngish fellow with a long, heavy-chinned, sallow countenance and an untidy fringe of dank, dark hair hanging over his brow. His soft collar, however, was violently torn apart, as if he'd been striving for air.

I wish to God he'd close his eyes, James prayed, leaning forward and feeling the man's limp, dangling wrist.

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Haas couldn't have been dead for very long, he decided, trembling a little, and allowing the wrist to swing back like a pendulum to its original position. He'd been dead perhaps half an hour, at most. With an effort James pulled himself together, and surveyed the room. Then his gaze encountered the table—and remained there.

There were two tumblers on the table, each about half-full. Also a nearly empty bottle of Scotch whisky, and a completely empty syphon. James sniffed at each tumbler, but was careful not to touch either of them. The tumbler nearer Haas had an odour which was almost but not entirely like Scotch whisky. The other tumbler had a pure whisky smell. Very simple, James decided—if Haas had left the table for a few moments. Primitive, in fact. And he wondered whether they often got away with elementary poison jobs like that in Java. There was an ash-tray on the table, too, which interested him. It contained a half-smoked cigar, and the unbroken ash-ends of two cigars. James studied the bare wooden floor, but discovered nothing except a burnt match.

He tiptoed out into the hall, and listened. There wasn't a sound in the house. For the first time his own position became vividly apparent to him. Time I left, he decided suddenly and simply—or there'll be a hell of a mix-up when the police arrive. Can't speak Dutch, either. He opened the front door again, and tiptoed out into the dusk. There wasn't a soul in the street.

His hands were still trembling, he noticed, as he paused on the asphalt paving outside to light a cigarette. And just as he was about to discard the match he saw something at his feet—on the sidewalk, in front of Klaes Haas' door. James stooped quickly, and picked up the half-smoked cigar he'd found there. It must have been a very long

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cigar, for the stub was nearly three inches in length and the band was away up at the charred end, so that most of the paper had been scorched. It was a narrow yellow band, James saw, holding it up towards an arc-lamp, which was just beginning to flicker and hum in the twilight; and the letters Concor—were still distinguishable upon it.

He found his way, somehow, along the canal to a broad well-lighted square. And he found a row of taxis in front of an enormous white building. I'm strangely calm, he told himself. Strangely calm—considering everything. Nevertheless, he was mopping his brow as he entered the cab.

It took the cab about twenty minutes to reach the docks. He found Baron van Goes in the purser's office, chatting with an acquaintance, an angular, humorous-looking young American named Scripps, who was the local representative of a worldwide travel agency.

"Hullo," said the baron, introducing them. "Where have you been?"

James kept his head.

"Up to the hotel with Katje. 'Twas a dizzy-looking pub, I thought."

Then he turned to Scripps. "You live here, don't you? I happened to see a large white building near the middle of the town. Was it the station, by any chance? I didn't know you had such fine railways in Java."

Scripps laughed.

"Sure it was the station. This isn't a wilderness out here. We're civilized. We claim to have the best railroad service in the East. Why, you can get right through to the other end of the island—to Batavia, on a full-fledged express with the finest type of equipment."

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"Really," said James. "That's verra interesting to me. Night train?"

"No sir. They don't run at night here. But the main line is pretty good, just the same. In fact, a great many Java Lloyd passengers bound for this region disembark at Tandjong Priok, because they're tired of sea travel, and come overland by train. They usually break the journey at Garoet or Djokja and reach here late in the afternoon the next day."

"I didn't realize that," James said and fell to thinking.

"Seen Haas?" the baron asked suddenly. James was floundering for a reply, when Scripps interrupted: "You're not referring to a fellow called Klaes Haas?"

The baron nodded.

Scripps enjoyed a good laugh at that.

"I'll blow you to all the lager you can hold if you'll give me a line-up on that bird. He still owes me seventy bucks, from a little game of stud we had over at Weltevreden several years ago. But I've kissed that good-bye; I don't kid myself. Klaes Haas is as smooth as any European who ever came out here. Remember all that trouble up at Medan, in Sumatra?"

"Anything to do with his being kicked out by the Dutch Indian Petroleum?" James asked innocently.

Scripps roared, and slapped his knees.

"Hell, no. We all saw quick enough that Haas wouldn't be able to hold down a job with the D.I.P.—even out at Amboina, where they sent him for a final try-out. I'm speaking of later on, after they'd discharged him because the books didn't tally. I'm speaking of the time when he ran away with the gorgeous little wife of a Sumatra tobacco man. You remember, don't you Baron?"

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No, the baron hadn't heard the story. Scripps helped himself to a cigar, from the purser's desk.

"Well. This rich old fellow, Topps, had just brought out a young bride from Amsterdam. He was about forty years nearer the grave than she, and all the men up at the Harmonie Club in Medan went cock-eyed with envy when they saw his luck. Anyway, this bird Haas came drifting along, looking for trouble as usual, and he found it. I guess he had a way with him; and I guess little Vera was pretty young and flighty. . . . So they skipped, away up into the hills, far back of Toba Lake. Wild kind of place. Then the little girl contracted plague, from the natives. And Haas, instead of taking care of her, or getting medical help, pulled his usual vanishing act—which he was damn good at, by the way. . . ."

He paused, frowning at his cigar, looking at James and the baron in turn. He sighed.

"Gentlemen, you can't get away with raw stuff like that—even out here. The poor kid passed out, alone there in the hills, and the story went all over the colonies. But they weren't able to pin anything on Haas. Being within law, you see, was a speciality of his. Besides he was careful to disappear after that. Took to the bottle, some say—so maybe he did have a conscience, after all. As for that poor old devil, Topps, I've heard that he's been kind of cuckoo ever since."

James rose, decisively and shook hands with Scripps.

"I'll be going up to the hotel again," he said. He paused waiting significantly for the baron to accompany him to the gangway. When they were alone on the dark and deserted promenade deck, he said quietly: "Baron. Klaes Haas is dead. I barged into it by mistake, you understand? He was dead when I reached his house, to have a chat

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with him. The details will be in the papers tomorrow, I'm thinking. But nobody except you, who gave me his address, will realize that I've seen him."

In the light shining from the companionway door Baron van Goes looked at James's honest, freckled face, a trifle leaner and graver perhaps than usual, and found what he had never failed to find there—sincerity and decency.

"Suicide?" he asked.

James shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm thinking it'll never be solved."

The baron lingered there, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"You were inquisitive about the trains from Batavia," he remarked slowly. "Very inquisitive. . . . I, myself, also, can see an interesting possibility—if I had time to think of such things." He nodded several times to himself. Then, with an air of finality, almost of brusqueness: "But I am a busy man, Mr. James. All that is not my affair. I belong to the sea; not to the land. I shall be on my way back to Holland tomorrow morning. The ship sails at eight— isn't it so?"

"It is so," James said.

They shook hands.

On his way down the gangway James glanced back. The baron had re-entered his office, his portly, white-clad figure outlined against a brilliant oblong of light. James fumbled in his pocket; found the half-consumed Sumatra cheroot; and threw it, with an air of exultation, into the dark, invisible harbour. Then he crossed the wharf to the taxi stand.

"Hotel des Indes," he told the batik-turbaned driver. He discovered that he hadn't the remotest idea how he was

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going to break the news to Katje. Perhaps he'd wait, and let it come to her—in the ironically swift manner with which all such news travelled. It was very sad for Katje, James thought, in his simple fashion. Probably she'd weep; and when she wept and bent her head that s-shaped tangle of hair, brighter than the morning sun, would slip down between her eyes. James McKay felt somewhat annoyed with himself, knowing that he wasn't at all in the correctly subdued mood to convey such tidings. There was a wild, singing joy in his heart—which all his decorous and respectable upbringing tried in vain to quell—as the taxi swerved into the tamarind-lined avenue, leading towards the lights of Soerabaya. . . .

Girl I am a very lonely
 one who needs your love
 if you please
 Truly
 Yours
 Mary

BY
ROY VICKERS



THE RUBBER TRUMPET

I

If you were to enquire at Scotland Yard for the Department of Dead Ends, you might be told, in all sincerity, that there was no such thing, because it is not called by that name nowadays. All the same, if it has no longer a room to itself, you may rest assured that its spirit hovers over the index files of which we are all so justly proud.

The Department came into existence in the spacious days of King Edward VII and it took everything that the other departments rejected. For instance, it noted and filed all those clues that had the exasperating effect of proving a palpably guilty man innocent. Its shelves were crowded with exhibits that might have been in the Black Museum—but were not. Its photographs were a perpetual irritation to all rising young detectives, who felt that they ought to have found the means of putting them in the Rogues' Gallery.

To the Department, too, were taken all those members of the public who insist on helping the police with obviously irrelevant information and preposterous theories. The one passport to the Department was a written state-

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ment by the senior officer in charge of the case that the information offered was absurd.

Judged by the standards of reason and common sense, its files were mines of misinformation. It proceeded largely by guesswork. On one occasion it hanged a murderer by accidentally punning on his name.

It was the function of the Department to connect persons and things that had no logical connection. In short, it stood for the antithesis of scientific detection. It played always for a lucky fluke—to offset the lucky fluke by which the criminal so often eludes the police. Often it muddled one crime with another and arrived at the correct answer by wrong reasoning.

As in the case of George Muncey and the rubber trumpet.

And note, please, that the rubber trumpet had nothing logically to do with George Muncey, nor the woman he murdered, nor the circumstances in which he murdered her.

II

Until the age of twenty-six George Muncey lived with his widowed mother in Chichester, the family income being derived from a chemist's shop, efficiently controlled by Mrs. Muncey with the aid of a manager and two assistants, of whom latterly George was one. Of his early youth we know only that he won a scholarship at a day-school, tenable for three years, which was cancelled at the end of a year, though not, apparently, for misconduct. He failed several times to obtain his pharmaceutical certificate, with the result that he was eventually put in charge of the fancy soaps, the hot water bottles and the photographic accessories.

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For this work he received two pounds per week. Every Saturday he handed the whole of it to his mother, who returned him fifteen shillings for pocket money. She had no need of the balance and only took it in order to nourish his self-respect. He did not notice that she bought his clothes and met all his other expenses.

George had no friends and very little of what an ordinary young man would regard as pleasure. He spent nearly all his spare time with his mother, to whom he was devoted. She was an amiable but very domineering woman and she does not seem to have noticed that her son's affection had in it a quality of childishness—that he liked her to form his opinions for him and curtail his liberties.

After his mother's death he did not resume his duties at the shop. For some eight months he mooned about Chichester. Then, the business having been sold and probate granted, he found himself in possession of some eight hundred pounds, with another two thousand pounds due to him in three months. He does not seem to have understood this part of the transaction—for he made no application for the two thousand, and as the solicitors could not find him until his name came into the papers, the two thousand remained intact for his defence.

That he was a normal but rather backward young man is proved by the fact that the walls of his bedroom were liberally decorated with photographs of the actresses of the moment and pictures of anonymous beauties cut from the more sporting weeklies. Somewhat naively he bestowed this picture gallery as a parting gift on the elderly cook.

He drew the whole of the eight hundred pounds in notes and gold, said good-bye to his home and went up to London. He stumbled on cheap and respectable lodgings in

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Pimlico. Then, in a gauche, small-town way, he set out to see life.

It was the year when *The Merry Widow* was setting all London a-whistling. Probably on some chance recommendation, he drifted to Daly's Theatre, where he bought himself a seat in the dress circle.

It was the beginning of the London season, and we may assume that he would have felt extremely self-conscious sitting in the circle in his ready-made lounge suit, had there not happened to be a woman also in morning dress next to him.

The woman was a Miss Hilda Callermere. She was forty-three, and if she escaped positive ugliness she was certainly without any kind of physical attractiveness, though she was neat in her person and reasonably well-dressed, in an old-fashioned way.

Eventually to the Department of Dead Ends came the whole story of his strange courtship.

There is a curious quality in the manner in which these two slightly unusual human beings approached one another. They did not speak until after the show, when they were wedged together in the corridor. Their voices seem to come to us out of a fog of social shyness and vulgar gentility. And it was she who took the initiative.

"If you'll excuse me speaking to you without an introduction, we seem to be rather out of it, you and I, what with one thing and another."

His reply strikes us now as somewhat unusual.

"Yes, rather!" he said. "Are you coming here again?"

"Yes, rather! I sometimes come twice a week."

During the next fortnight they both went three times to *The Merry Widow*, but on the first two of these occasions they missed each other. On the third occasion, which was

a Saturday night, Miss Callermere invited George Muncey to walk with her on the following morning in Battersea Park.

Here shyness dropped from them. They slipped quite suddenly on to an easy footing of friendship. George Muncey accepted her invitation to lunch. She took him to a comfortably furnished eight-roomed house—her own—in which she lived with an aunt whom she supported. For, in addition to the house, Miss Callermere owned an income of six hundred pounds derived from gilt-edged investments.

But these considerations weighed hardly at all with George Muncey—for he had not yet spent fifty pounds of his eight hundred, and at this stage he had certainly no thought of marriage with Miss Callermere.

III

Neither of them had any occupation, so they could meet whenever they chose. Miss Callermere undertook to show George London. Her father had been a cheery, beery jerry-builder with sporting interests and she had reacted from him into a parched severity of mind. She marched George round the Tower of London, the British Museum and the like, reading aloud extracts from a guide-book. They went neither to the theatres nor to the music-halls, for Miss Callermere thought these frivolous and empty-headed—with the exception of *The Merry Widow*, which she believed to be opera, and therefore cultural. And the extraordinary thing was that George Muncey liked it all.

There can be no doubt that this smug little spinster, some sixteen years older than himself, touched a chord of sympathy in his nature. But she was wholly unable to cater for that part of him that had plastered photographs of public beauties on the walls of his bedroom,

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She never went to *The Merry Widow* again, but once or twice he would sneak off to Daly's by himself. *The Merry Widow*, in fact, provided him with a dream-life. We may infer that in his imagination he identified himself with Mr. Joseph Coyne, who nightly, in the character of Prince Dannilo, would disdain the beautiful Sonia only to have her rush the more surely to his arms in the finale. Rather a dangerous fantasy for a backward young man from the provinces who was beginning to lose his shyness!

There was, indeed, very little shyness about him when, one evening after seeing Miss Callermere home, he was startled by the sight of a young parlour-maid, who had been sent out to post a letter, some fifty yards from Miss Callermere's house. If she bore little or no likeness to Miss Lily Elsie in the role of Sonia, she certainly looked quite lovely in her white cap and the streamers that were then worn. And she was smiling and friendly and natural.

She was, of course, Ethel Fairbrass. She lingered with George Muncey for over five minutes. And then comes another of those strange little dialogues.

"Funny, a girl like you being a slavey! When's your evening off?"

"Six o'clock, to-morrow. But what's it got to do with you?"

"I'll meet you at the corner of this road. Promise you I will."

"Takes two to make a promise. My name's Ethel Fairbrass, if you want to know. What's yours?"

"Dannilo."

"*Coo!* Fancy calling you that! Dannilo what?"

George had not foreseen the necessity for inventing a surname and discovered that it is quite difficult. He couldn't very well say "Smith" or "Robinson", so he said:

"Prince."

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George, it will be observed, was not an imaginative man. When she met him the following night he could think of nowhere to take her but to *The Merry Widow*. He was even foolish enough to let her have a programme, but she did not read the names of the characters. When the curtain went up she was too entranced with Miss Lily Elsie, whom (like every pretty girl at the time) she thought she resembled, to take any notice of Mr. Joseph Coyne and his character name. If she had tumbled to the witless transposition of the names she might have become suspicious of him. In which case George Muncey might have lived to a ripe old age.

But she didn't.

IV

Altogether, Ethel Fairbrass provided an extremely satisfactory substitute for the dream-woman of George's fantasy. Life was beginning to sweeten. In the daylight hours he would enjoy his friendship with Miss Callermere, the pleasure of which was in no way touched by his infatuation for the pretty parlour-maid.

In early September Ethel became entitled to her holiday. She spent the whole fortnight with George at South-end. And George wrote daily to Miss Callermere, telling her that he was filling the place of a chemist friend of his mother's, while the latter took his holiday. He actually contrived to have the letters addressed to the care of a local chemist. The letters were addressed "George Muncey", while at the hotel the couple were registered as "Mr. and Mrs. D. Prince".

Now the fictional Prince Dannilo was notoriously an open-handed and free-living fellow—and Dannilo Prince proceeded to follow in his footsteps. Ethel Fairbrass un-

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doubtedly had the time of her life. They occupied a suite. ("Coo! A bathroom all to our own two selves, George, and use it whenever we like!")

He hired a car for her, with chauffeur—which cost ten pounds a day at that time. He gave her champagne whenever he could induce her to drink it, and bought her some quite expensive presents.

It is a little surprising that at the end of a fortnight of this kind of thing she went back to her occupation. But she did. There was nothing of the mercenary about Ethel.

On his return to London, George was very glad to see Miss Callermere. They resumed their interminable walks and he went almost daily to her house for lunch or dinner. A valuable arrangement, this, for the little diversion at Southend had made a sizable hole in his eight hundred pounds.

It was a bit of a nuisance to have to leave early in order to snatch a few minutes with Ethel. After Southend the few snatched minutes had somehow lost their charm. There were, too, Ethel's half-days and her Sundays, the latter involving him in a great many troublesome lies to Miss Callermere.

In the middle of October he started sneaking off to *The Merry Widow* again. Which was a bad sign. For it meant that he was turning back again from reality to his dream-life. The Reality, in the meantime, had lost her high spirits and was inclined to weep unreasonably and to nag more than a little.

At the beginning of November Ethel presented him with certain very valid arguments in favour of fixing the date of their wedding, a matter which had hitherto been kept vaguely in the background.

George was by now heartily sick of her and contemplated

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leaving her in the lurch. Strangely enough, it was her final threat to tell Miss Callermere that turned the scale and decided George to make the best of a bad job and marry her.

v

As Dannilo Prince he married her one foggy morning at the registrar's office in Henrietta Street. Mr. and Mrs. Fairbrass came up from Banbury for the wedding. They were not very nice about it, although from the social point of view the marriage might be regarded as a step-up for Ethel.

"Where are you going for your honeymoon?" asked Mrs. Fairbrass. "That is—if you're going to *have* a honeymoon."

"Southend," said the unimaginative George, and to Southend he took her for the second time. There was no need for a suite now, so they went to a small family-and-commercial hotel. Here George was unreasonably jealous of the commercial travellers, who were merely being polite to a rather forlorn bride. In wretched weather he insisted on taking her for walks, with the result that he himself caught a very bad cold. Eucalyptus and hot toddy became the dominant note in a town which was associated in the girl's mind with champagne and bath salts. But they had to stick it for the full fortnight, because George had told Miss Callermere that he was again acting as substitute for the chemist friend of his mother's in Southend.

According to the files of the Department, they left Southend by the three-fifteen on the thirtieth of November. George had taken first-class returns. The three-fifteen was a popular non-stop, but on this occasion there were hardly a score of persons travelling to London. One of the first-class carriages was occupied by a man alone with a

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young baby wrapped in a red shawl. Ethel wanted to get into this compartment, perhaps having a sneaking hope that the man would require her assistance in dealing with the baby. But George did not intend to concern himself with babies one moment before he would be compelled to do so, and they went into another compartment.

Ethel, however, seems to have looked forward to her impending career with a certain pleasure. Before leaving Southend she had paid a visit to one of those shops that cater for summer visitors and miraculously remain open through the winter. She had a bulky parcel, which she opened in the rather pathetic belief that it would amuse George.

The parcel contained a large child's bucket, a disproportionately small wooden spade, a sailing-boat to the scale of the spade, a length of Southend rock and a rubber trumpet of which the stem was wrapped round with red and blue wool. It was a baby's trumpet and of rubber so that it would not hurt the baby's gums. In the mouth-piece, shielded by the rubber, was a little metal contraption that made the noise.

Ethel put the trumpet to her mouth and blew through the metal contraption.

Perhaps, in fancy, she heard her baby doing it. Perhaps, after a honeymoon of neglect and misery, she was making a desperate snatch at the spirit of gaiety, hoping he would attend to her and perhaps indulge in a little horseplay. But for the actual facts we have to depend on George's version.

"I said: 'Don't make that noise, Ethel—I'm trying to read,' or something like that. And she said: 'I feel like a bit of music to cheer me up', and she went on blowing the trumpet. So I caught hold of it and threw it out of the

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window. I didn't hurt her and she didn't seem to mind much. And we didn't have another quarrel over it and I went on reading my paper until we got to London."

At Fenchurch Street they claimed their luggage and left the station. Possibly Ethel abandoned the parcel containing the other toys, for they were never heard of again.

When the train was being cleaned, a dead baby was found under the seat of a first-class compartment, wrapped in a red shawl. It was subsequently ascertained that the baby had not been directly murdered but had died more or less naturally in convulsions.

But before this was known, Scotland Yard searched for the man who had been seen to enter the train with the baby, as if for a murderer. A platelayer found the rubber trumpet on the line and forwarded it to them. They combed the shops of Southend and found that only one rubber trumpet had been sold—to a young woman whom the shopkeeper did not know. The trail ended here.

The rubber trumpet went to the Department of Dead Ends.

VI

Of the eight hundred pounds there was a little over a hundred and fifty left by the time they returned from the official honeymoon at Southend. He took her to furnished rooms in Ladbroke Grove and a few days later to a tenement in the same district, which he furnished at a cost of thirty pounds.

She seems to have asked him no awkward questions about money. Every morning after breakfast he would leave the tenement, presumably in order to go to work. Actually he would loaf about the West End until it was time to meet Miss Callermere. He liked especially going to

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the house in Battersea for lunch on Sundays. And here, of course, the previous process reversed itself and it was Ethel who had to be told the troublesome lies that were so difficult to invent.

"You seem different lately, George," said Miss Callermere one Sunday after lunch. "I believe you're living with a ballet girl."

George was not quite sure what a ballet girl was, but it sounded rather magnificently wicked. As he was anxious not to involve himself in further inventions, he said:

"She's not a ballet girl. She used to be a parlour-maid."

"I really only want to know one thing about her," said Miss Callermere. "And that is, whether you are fond of her?"

"No, I'm not!" said George with complete truthfulness.

"It's a pity to have that kind of thing in your life—you are dedicated to science. For your own sake, George, why not get rid of her?"

Why not? George wondered why he had not thought of it before. He had only to move, to stop calling himself by the ridiculous name of Dannilo Prince, and the thing was as good as done. He would go back at once and pack.

When he got back to the tenement Ethel gave him an unexpectedly warm reception.

"You told me you were going to the S.D.P. Sunday Brotherhood, you did. And you never went near them, because you met that there Miss Callermere in Battersea Park, because I followed you and saw you. And then you went back to her house, which is Number Fifteen, Laurel Road, which I didn't know before. And what you can see in a dried-up old maid like that beats me. It's time she knew that she's rolling her silly sheep's eyes at another woman's husband. And I'm going to tell her before I'm a day older."

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She was whipping on hat and coat, and George lurched forward to stop her. His foot caught on a gas-ring, useless now that he had installed a gas range—a piece of lumber that Ethel ought to have removed weeks ago. But she used it as a stand for the iron.

George picked up the gas-ring. If she were to go to Miss Callermere and make a brawl, he himself would probably never be able to go there again. He pushed her quickly on to the bed, then swung the gas-ring—swung it several times.

He put all the towels, every soft absorbent thing he could find, under the bed. Then he washed himself, packed a suitcase and left the tenement.

He took the suitcase to his old lodgings, announced that he had come back there to live, and then presented himself at the house in Battersea in time for supper.

"I've done what you told me," he said to Miss Callermere. "Paid her off. Shan't hear from her any more."

The Monday morning papers carried the news of the murder, for the police had been called on Sunday evening by the tenants of the flat above. The hunt was started for Dannilo Prince.

By Tuesday the dead girl's parents had been interviewed and her life story appeared on Wednesday morning. "My daughter was married to Prince at the Henrietta Street registrar's office on November 16th, 1907. He took her straight away for a honeymoon at Southend, where they stayed a fortnight." There was a small crowd at the bottom of Laurel Road to gape at the house where she had so recently worked as a parlour-maid. Fifty yards from Number Fifteen! But if Miss Callermere noticed the crowd she is not recorded as having made any comment upon it to anyone.

In a few days Scotland Yard knew that they would

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never find Dannilo Prince. In fact, it had all been as simple as George had anticipated. He had just moved—and that was the end of his unlucky marriage. The addition of the murder had not complicated things because he had left no clue behind him.

Now as there was nothing whatever to connect George Muncey with Dannilo Prince, George's chances of arrest were limited to the chance of an accidental meeting between himself and someone who had known him as Prince. There was an hotel proprietor, a waiter and a chambermaid at Southend and an estate-agent at Ladbroke Grove. And, of course, Ethel's father and mother. Of these persons only the estate-agent lived in London.

A barrister, who was also a statistician, entertained himself by working out the averages. He came to the conclusion that George Muncey's chance of being caught was equal to his chance of winning the first prize in the Calcutta Sweep *twenty-three times in succession*.

But the barrister did not calculate the chances of the illogical guesswork of the Department of Dead Ends hitting the bull's-eye by mistake.

VII

While the hue and cry for Dannilo Prince passed over his head, George Muncey dedicated himself to science with such energy that in a fortnight he had obtained a post with a chemist in Walham. Here he presided over a counter devoted to fancy soaps, hot water bottles, photographic apparatus and the like—for which he received two pounds a week and a minute commission that added zest to his work.

At Easter he married Miss Callermere in church. That lady had mobilized all her late father's associates and, to

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their inward amusement, arrayed herself in white satin and veil for the ceremony. As it would have been unreasonable to ask George's employers for a holiday after so short a term of service, the newly married couple dispensed with a honeymoon. The aunt entered a home for indigent gentlewomen with an allowance of a hundred a year from her niece. George once again found himself in a spacious, well-run house.

During their brief married life, this oddly assorted couple seem to have been perfectly happy. The late Mr. Callermere's friends were allowed to slip back into oblivion, because they showed a tendency to giggle whenever George absent-mindedly addressed his wife as "Miss Callermere".

His earnings of two pounds a week may have seemed insignificant beside his wife's unearned income. But in fact it was the basis of their married happiness. Every Saturday he handed her the whole of his wages. She would retain twenty-five shillings, because they both considered it essential to his self-respect that he should pay the cost of his food. She handed him back fifteen shillings for pocket money. She read the papers and formed his opinions for him. She seemed to allow him little of what most men would regard as pleasure, but George had no complaint on this score.

Spring passed into summer and nearly everybody had forgotten the murder of Ethel Prince in a tenement in Ladbroke Grove. It is probably true to say that, in any real sense of the word, George Muncey had forgotten it too. He had read very little and did not know that murderers were popularly supposed to be haunted by their crime and to start guiltily at every chance mention of it.

He received no reaction whatever when his employer said to him one morning:

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"There's this job-line of rubber trumpets. I took half a gross. We'll mark them at one-and-a-penny. Put one on your counter with the rubber teats and try them on women with babies."

George took one of the rubber trumpets from the cardboard case containing the half gross. It had red and blue wool wound about the stem. He put it next the rubber teats and forgot about it.

VIII

Wilkins, the other assistant, held his pharmaceutical certificate, but he was not stand-offish on that account. One day, to beguile the boredom of the slack hour after lunch, he picked up the rubber trumpet and blew it.

Instantly George was sitting in the train with Ethel, telling her "not to make that noise". When Wilkins put the trumpet down, George found himself noticing the trumpet and thought the red and blue wool very hideous. He picked it up—Ethel's had felt just like that when he had thrown it out of the window.

Now it cannot for one moment be held that George felt anything in the nature of remorse. The truth was that the rubber trumpet, by reminding him so vividly of Ethel, had stirred up dormant forces in his nature. Ethel had been very comely and jolly and playful when one was in the mood for it—as one often was, in spite of everything.

The trumpet, in short, produced little more than a sense of bewilderment. Why could not things have gone on as they began? It was only as a wife that Ethel was utterly intolerable, because she had no sense of order and did not really look after a chap. Now that he was married to Miss Callermere, if only Ethel had been available on, say, Wednesday evenings and alternate Sundays, life would

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have been full at once of colour and comfort. . . . He tried to sell the trumpet to a lady with a little girl and a probable baby at home, but without success.

On the next day he went as far as admitting to himself that the trumpet had got on his nerves. Between a quarter to one and a quarter past, when Wilkins went out to lunch, he picked up the trumpet and blew it. And just before closing time he blew it again, when Wilkins was there.

George was not subtle enough to humbug himself. The trumpet stirred longings that were better suppressed. So the next day he wrote out a bill for one-and-a-penny, put one-and-a-penny of his pocket money into the cash register and stuffed the trumpet into his coat pocket. Before supper that night he put it in the hot water furnace.

"There's a terrible smell in the house. What did you put in the furnace, George?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me the truth, dear."

"A rubber trumpet stuck on my counter. Fair got on my nerves, it did. I paid the one-and-a-penny and I burnt it."

"That was very silly, wasn't it? It'll make you short in your pocket money. And in the circumstances I don't feel inclined to make it up for you."

That would be all right, George assured her, and inwardly thought how lucky he was to have such a wife. She could keep a fellow steady and pull him up when he went one over the odds.

Three days later his employer looked through the stock.

"I see that rubber trumpet has gone. Put up another. It may be a good line."

And so the whole business began over again. George, it will be observed, for all his unimaginativeness, was a

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spiritually economical man. His happy contentment with his wife would, he knew, be jeopardized if he allowed himself to be reminded of that other disorderly, fascinating side of life that had been presided over by Ethel.

There were six dozen of the rubber trumpets, minus the one burnt at home, and his employer would expect one-and-a-penny for each of them. Thirteen shillings a dozen. But the dozens themselves were thirteen, which complicated the calculation, but in the end he got the sum right. He made sure of this by doing it backwards and "proving" it. He still had twenty-three pounds left out of the eight hundred.

Mrs. Muncey had a rather nice crocodile dressing-case which she had bought for herself and quite falsely described as "gift of the bridegroom to the bride".

On the next day George borrowed the crocodile dressing-case on the plea that he wished to bring some goods from the shop home for Christmas. He brought it into the shop on the plea that it contained his dinner-jacket and that he intended to change at the house of a friend without going home that night. And as he was known to have married "an heiress" neither Wilkins nor his employer were particularly surprised that he should possess a dinner-jacket and a crocodile dressing-case in which to carry it about.

At a quarter to one, when he was again alone in the shop, he crammed half a gross (less one) of rubber trumpets into the crocodile dressing-case. When his employer came back from lunch he said:

"I've got rid of all those rubber trumpets, Mr. Arrowsmith. An old boy came in, said he was to do with an orphanage, and I talked him into buying the lot."

Mr. Arrowsmith was greatly astonished.

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"Bought the lot, did you say? Didn't he ask for a discount?"

"No, Mr. Arrowsmith. I think he was a bit loopy myself."

Mr. Arrowsmith looked very hard at George and then at the cash register. Six thirteens, less one, at one-and-a-penny—four pounds, three and fivepence. It was certainly a very funny thing. But then, the freak customer appears from time to time, and at the end of the day Mr. Arrowsmith had got over his surprise.

Journeying from Walham to Battersea, one goes on the Underground to Victoria Station, and continues the journey on the overhead electric. From the fact that George Muncey that evening took the crocodile case to Victoria Station, it has been argued that he intended to take the rubber trumpets home and perhaps bury them in the garden or deal with them in some other way. But this ignores the fact that he told his wife he intended to bring home some goods for Christmas.

The point is of minor importance, because the dressing-case never reached home with him that night. At the top of the steps leading from the Underground it was snatched from him.

George's first sensation, on realizing that he had been robbed, was one of relief. The rubber trumpets, he had already found, could not be burnt; they would certainly have been a very great nuisance to him. The case, he knew, cost fifteen guineas, and there was still enough left of the twenty-three pounds to buy a new one on the following day.

IX

At closing-time the next day, while George and Wilkins were tidying up, Mr. Arrowsmith was reading the evening paper.

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"Here, Muncey! Listen to this. 'Jake Mendel, thirty-seven, of no fixed abode, was charged before Mr. Ramsden this morning with the theft of a crocodile dressing-case from the precincts of Victoria Station. Mr. Ramsden asked the police what was inside the bag. "A number of toy trumpets, your worship, made of rubber. There were seventy-seven of 'em all told." Mr. Ramsden: "Seventy-seven rubber trumpets! Well, *now* there really is no reason why the police should not have their own band." (Laughter). Mr. Arrowsmith laughed too and then: "Muncey, that looks like your lunatic."

"Yes, Mr. Arrowsmith," said George indifferently, then went contentedly home to receive his wife's expostulations about a new crocodile dressing-case which had been delivered during the afternoon. It was not quite the same to look at, because the original one had been made to order. But it had been bought at the same shop and the manager had obliged George by charging the same price for it.

In the meantime the police were relying on the newspaper paragraph to produce the owner of the crocodile case. When he failed to materialize on the following morning they looked at the name of the manufacturer and took the case round to him.

The manufacturer informed them that he had made that case the previous spring to the order of a Miss Callermere—that the lady had since married and only that previous day her husband, Mr. Muncey, had ordered an exactly similar one but had accepted a substitute from stock.

"Ring up George Muncey and ask him to come up and identify the case—and take away those indiarubber trumpets!" ordered the superintendent.

Mrs. Muncey answered the telephone and from her they obtained George's business address.

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"A chemist's assistant!" said the superintendent. "Seems to me rather funny. Those trumpets may be his employer's stock. And he may have been pinching 'em. Don't ring him up—go down. And find out if the employer has anything to say about the stock. See him before you see Muncy."

At Walham the sergeant was taken into the dispensary where he promptly enquired whether Mr. Arrowsmith had missed seventy-seven rubber trumpets from his stock.

"I haven't missed them—but I sold them the day before yesterday—seventy-seven, that's right! Or rather, my assistant, George Muncy, did. Here, Muncy!" And as George appeared:

"You sold the rest of the stock of those rubber trumpets to a gentleman who said he was connected with an orphanage—the day before yesterday it was—didn't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Arrowsmith," said George.

"Bought the lot without asking for a discount," said Mr. Arrowsmith proudly. "Four pounds, three shillings and fivepence. I could tell you of another case that happened years ago when a man came into this very shop and——"

The sergeant felt his head whirling a little. The assistant had sold seventy-seven rubber trumpets to an eccentric gentleman. The goods had been duly paid for and taken away—and the goods were subsequently found in the assistant's wife's dressing-case.

"Did you happen to have a crocodile dressing-case stolen from you at Victoria Station the day before yesterday, Mr. Muncy?" asked the Sergeant.

George was in a quandary. If he admitted that the crocodile case was his wife's—he would admit to Mr. Arrowsmith that he had been lying when he had said that he had cleverly sold the whole of the seventy-seven rubber trum-

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pets without even having to give away a discount. So:

"No," said George.

"Ah, I thought not! There's a mistake somewhere. I expect it's that manufacturer put us wrong. Sorry to have troubled you, gentlemen! Good morning!"

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Arrowsmith. "You *did* have a crocodile dressing-case here that day, Muncey, with your evening clothes in it. And you *do* go home by Victoria. But what is that about the trumpets, sergeant? They couldn't have been in Mr. Muncey's case if he sold them over the counter."

"I don't know what they've got hold of, Mr. Arrowsmith, and that's a fact," said George. "I think I'm wanted in the shop."

George was troubled, so he got leave to go home early. He told his wife how he had lied to the police, and confessed to her about the trumpets. Soon she had made him tell her the real reason for his dislike of the trumpets. The result was that when the police brought her the original crocodile case she flatly denied that it was hers.

In law, there was no means by which the ownership of the case could be foisted upon the Muncseys against their will. Pending the trial of Jake Mendel, the pickpocket, the case, with its seventy-seven rubber trumpets, was deposited with the Department of Dead Ends.

A few feet above it on a shelf stood the identical trumpet which George Muncey had thrown out of the window of the three-fifteen non-stop Southend to Fenchurch Street, some seven months ago.

The Department took one of the trumpets from the bag and set it beside the trumpet on the shelf. There was no logical connection between them whatever. The Department simply guessed that there might be a connection.

E R U B B E R T R U M P E T

They tried to connect Walham with Southend and drew blank. They traced the history of the seventy-seven Walham trumpets and found it simple enough until the moment when George Muncey put them in the crocodile case.

They went back to the Southend trumpet and read in their files that it had not been bought by the man with the by but by a young woman.

Then they tried a cross-reference to young women and Southend. They found that dead end, the Ethel Fairbrass order. They found: "*My daughter was married to Prince at the Henrietta Street registrar's office on November the sixteenth, 1907. He took her straight away for a honeymoon at Southend where they stayed a fortnight.*"

Fourteen days from November the sixteenth meant November the thirtieth, the day the rubber trumpet was found on the line.

One rubber trumpet is dropped on a railway line by (possibly) a young woman. The young woman is subsequently murdered (but not with a rubber trumpet). A young man lives in an eccentric way with seventy-seven rubber trumpets more than six months later.

The connection was wholly illogical. But the Department specialized in illogical connections. It communicated a wild guess—in the form of a guarded Minute—to Detective-Inspector Rason.

Rason went down to Banbury and brought the old Fairbrass couple to Walham.

He gave them five shillings and sent them into Arrowth's to buy a hot water bottle.

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my name → P. T. I